

The broad basin of the Call Tree leveled. They walked easily. The violet flowers thickened into taller clumps. It grew harder for Tyle, looking back, to see if Gil had followed. He might have, crouched low. She hoped he had. Crouching might make his back ache, make him quit and go home. More likely, though, he would walk crouched till he collapsed in pain. They might not hear his cries. She didn't want him to die, just stop speaking for the Tree. He was not its voice. The tree was a machine. Without it there could be no human presence on Gallagen. An ark had brought humanity in embryo. It had tasted the new world first with colonizing bacteria that could not last beyond a certain number of iterations, but these could be sampled and analyzed. Then the seeds of what would become the tree could be sown, the embryos actualized, the incubators landed. Things evolved into Gnostics to rear the first expendable children; with each decimated generation, they learned what the next generation should become. Fine-tuning achieved equilibrium needing a few generations more to seat itself firmly, so that children born would not succumb to illness.

Disease became what humans had brought to help them adapt: so the need to find a ceiling – a biological time-out that let the planet spring the surprises it still had while claiming fewer lives, till finally no more would be claimed. Except by rogue nologies, Sirens luring sailors to drown in violent surf, drawn by sweet singing. A calling put you in tune with Gallagen. There was pleasure in it, a song in the blood, a racing thrill in one's patterned skin. What Gil felt when weather changed or what Coe felt when she climbed or what Tyle's parents had niggled to in the presence of conductive-metal ores. The song of Gallagen.

At midday they drank at a spring, filled their water flasks and marched on, easing as they walked. Night fell. Tyle left her slap light in her pack. They bedded down. Coe instantly slept but Tyle lay watching stars crawl across the sky, making constellations: The Lander, Post Man, The Vine. She wanted sleep but felt Uncle Gil lurching, possibly knowing exactly where she and Coe lay, maybe stumbling in the dark. If she could just sleep! She had to climb tomorrow. The tree had grown *ggantu* that day, soaring to the clouds, broad at the base, no longer presenting a blank shape but showing great green bows dependent from the trunk, thin at the edges, translucent as melon. If she didn't sleep, she'd never reach the top. Some biogram would nab her a quarter-way up.

Under a thin breeze the night lay silent. There were no animals, no flying things nor any that crawled. But she knew of dogs, cats and horses. She had seen graffiti from the Landing in Hometown. The Lander still orbited Gallagen, filled with embryos yet to descend.

If I make it, will they down?

She lay awake.

Dawn lit a pale blue sky. Sleepless grit coated Tyle's eyes. She bathed them in water from her flask.

'You don't have to climb today,' Coe said. 'Tomorrow's good enough. We got plenty of food.'

Chewing jakka root, Tyle shook her head, swallowed, gulped water. 'Let's get going.' Nodding backwards. 'He's prob'ly out there.'

'How 'bout that, Gnostic?' Coe asked. 'Gil still sneakin' around?'

'The tree overwhelms,' Gnostic said. 'Too near.'

'Great,' said Tyle. 'A Gnostic that can't know.'

Gnostic pointed. 'I know that. Have not known the tree since it called me out.'

'Look, your uncle prob'ly went home,' Coe said.

'No, he wants to see this,' Tyle said, 'so he can denounce me.'

'He's right that only one person climbs at a time. Been that way forever. Right, Gnostic?'

Gnostic said, 'Much less time than forever.'

'But you offered to climb with me,' Tyle reminded Gnostic.

'You have the clean taste of song, Tyle Ryko.'

Coe asked, 'Did you tell her I should help?'

'No. Her idea,' said Gnostic.

'Does it make any difference to the tree if Tyle and I are both on it?'

'Yeah, Gnostic. Like, if I climb with Coe but not you,' Tyle asked, paring jakka root with her knife, 'would I pick up a biogram, just like anybody?'

'Or does climbing with me,' asked Coe, 'make Tyle immune?'

Gnostic said, 'You have the clean taste of song, Tyle Ryko.'

'But do I need another person to climb with?' Tyle asked.

'You never said I needed it.'

'Gnostics can't know all.'

Incredibly, Tyle saw sadness in Gnostic's eyes. Not thinking, she offered a slice of jakka root she had pared with her knife. An offer made in kindness, not from practicality. Gnostics didn't eat. Gnostic examined the offered bite then shook its head and moved off.

'Did I hurt its feelings?' Gnostic had left her the other evening too, when she had asked if definitely one day the tree would sing.

Gnostics can't know all – not *don't* but *can't*.

She looked up. A thin cloud layer hazed the tree. This near, the height of it staggered Tyle. 'How tall is it?'

Coe said, 'Two kilometers.'

'Where'd Gnostic go?' Tyle looked around.



The violet flower clumps, here as tall as people, made a natural colonnade through which they marched till the trunk of the Call Tree stood like a cliff on a wide flat field.

"You see Gnostic anywhere – is it climbing already?" Tyle asked.

Hands on hips, gazing up, Coe shook her head. Tyle walked to the tree and felt the black-green bark, whorled with light green patterns like the ladder net on Coe's tanned skin or the veins on dragonfly wings she'd seen in Hometown. The trunk was pocketed with what seemed random handholds. Tyle slid a hand into one. A resinous gum resisted letting go. If it was like that all the way up – then she stepped back. This was the Call Tree, what she had said all her life she would never climb, and here she was touching it! She might have received any stupid bioqram without even giving herself the chance to forget this and just go home.

She touched her hand, inspected, sniffed it then looked up the black-green trunk, noting its plastic milkiness, how the bows, drinking sunlight to power the tree, hugely shingled and shaded the body of this factory, this bioqram dispenser.

Tyle glanced back at Coe (still staring up, probably recalling her own climb) and started walking along the sheer cliff face of the pocketed mottled trunk. The tree seemed not to have risen from the ground but had been rather lowered into it like that part of a seagoing vessel called the mast – the part Odysseus had had himself lashed to so he could hear the Sirens sing and live, as his oarsmen, ears plugged with wax, rowed on. She too would soon be lashed taut, going for the top of the tree and the sweetest song it had to offer, the song of freedom from nology and symbiosis, not a Gallajen song but a song of the Earth.

Then she found Gnostic in pieces on the ground, its legs and arms torn off.

At the graffiks place in Hometown, she'd seen how predators caught and reended prey. Her mind swam as she tried swiftly to revise her certain knowledge of Gallajen ecology and suddenly populate this planet with actual predators.

But predators are their prey, or parts of them. Inspecting Gnostic's remains, Tyle saw that human hands had done this, as if stripping a vine branch of leaves.

No doubt who.

Tyle drew her knife and spun – spun right into the arc of Uncle Gil's staff. The tip struck the knife from her fist. A knuckle popped from its socket. Sunlight flashed on the spinning blue blade.

Gil stood with the staff crosswise to himself, poised to swing it forward to clock her upside of the head. His eyes glared like slap lights. He showed his tooth in that way he'd been doing for years, she realized. I should have seen it coming. Or had seen it coming but had refused to acknowledge that her own uncle could become as mad as Post Man – dangerously mad to himself and to others. To her.

'You get up that tree now,' he said.

'You broke something in my hand.'

He nodded. 'That's too bad about that. You do the best you can, is all. It's no one to blame but yourself.'

She watched him as if she had awakened from a nightmare only to find the dream solid. Tyle shook her head.

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'You tore a Gnostic apart. You tore its arms and legs off. You killed it.'

Gnostic spoke: 'I am much abused, Tyle, but not dead.'

Gil nodded, his green-spoked eyes fixed on Tyle. 'Too bad about that too. Whole damn lot of 'em's worthless. Have been for years.'

Tyle squeezed her eyes shut. 'Who are you to say this – who are you?'

'I'm your uncle and I'm telling you to climb that tree!'

She showed him her right hand, the index finger crooked to one side and swollen. 'I can't climb now – are you stupid?'

'You'll climb best you can.'

'I'll fall,' she explained as to an idiot.

'Hope you get a calling 'fore you climb too high.'

'What are you so scared of?' she wondered. 'You're always telling people they have to do the right thing. But you don't want what's right – what's right is having animals here. Birds

The flow rafting Tyle began to slow but not till the top of the basin was crested did she touch ground. Like a swimmer trying for a toehold, she extended her legs, dug in her heels, the beetle-green surf at her back. Then she was able to fight the current, same as in a river. The flow ebbed to her chest then her waist then held steady, up to her knees. no longer the flow of reaction but of purpose



and insects, all of it. It's supposed to be that way. We came here to live like on Earth.'

Gil choked on rage. 'It's not for a girl like you, with your mouth, to know anything until you get a calling. When you get called, then you can speak. I can tell you right now, you'll speak different. You never hear the songs I hear in the rain or the snow. You don't know the storm and wind song or knowing it's gold in the ground 'cause you feel it in your skin, in your bones.'

'But it has to end,' she told him. 'It's always been supposed to end! Why don't you get it?'

Gnostic said, 'Pleasure. Make the tree revise its calling, he loses his.'

'You don't know nothing,' Gil told it, sneering at the torn pieces. 'Your kind's all trouble, ever was.'

'What happens if he loses it?' Tyle asked Gnostic.

'Never mind,' Gil said. 'Get climbing.'

'I can't climb - I keep telling you!' She yelled. Again she asked Gnostic, 'What happens?'

Gnostic said, 'The tree gave callings so people could live, do better what they must. To make callings desirable, pleasure was added. His calling is aberrant, like mutated nology. Rogue.'

'There ain't nothing wrong with me!' Gil screamed. Gnostic said, 'It matters little. Weather-sense here is largely un-needed.'

Gil swung the staff forward and brought it high, running at the pieces of the Gnostic to stove in its head. Tyle cried, 'No!' and grappled the wooden staff in both arms, throwing her weight on it as Gil drove it down. They tumbled and the staff split with a loud snap but not before the driving end crunched Gnostic's head into the dirt.

Then Coe hit the sprawled man like a jungle cat. Gil locked and hollered, slashed at Coe with one end of the split staff. She raked his leg. Gil ran but not far and bent to staunch blood with his torn shirt.

Crosched, Coe inspected Tyle. 'You're bleeding. Did I claw you?'

Tyle shook her head. She'd cut her lip. Sun made the blood bright red. At her feet lay Gnostic, obliterated.

More in anger than from any felt need, Tyle pulled her skewed finger and heard it pop back into its socket. It suddenly felt better but by no means healed - she still could not climb.

Yet Gnostic had never stressed the climbing as Gil had, nor as Tyle herself had stressed it. Gnostic had stressed how *clean* Tyle tasted.

The blood, she thought. Wipe it on the tree. Let it know you.

With blood already in her mouth, Tyle spit into her palm till most of the irony taste was gone, then reached out to smear it on the trunk of the Call Tree. Gil, still staunching the cuts on his leg, stopped then moved toward the two girls. Coe raised a length of the split staff to warn him off. He halted, glaring, watched helplessly as Tyle slid her gory hand into one of the climbing pockets. She let the tree know her blood and saliva, working it in as far as possible - better, she felt, than merely wiping it on the trunk.

A long thin sigh sang from somewhere. Tyle looked at Coe then at Gil but neither had made it. A thin tone harmonized with another in a tentative chord. Other tones answered, adding variations. All from way up.

Gil cried, 'Stop what your doing!'

Tyle wondered: Should I stop? Am I making this worse? Wishing Gnostic could help, she looked down at what was left of it.

The ruined parts of the tiny being were becoming dust, its head eye caving in, green coat going gramy. Then a cry tore from the tree like blaring horns. Tyle looked up sharply.

The vast green bows of the tree waved like the blades of enormous fans.

'They going up or down?' Tyle asked.

'Up, I think,' Coe said. 'Like flower petals. Like they're opening.'

'On hinges,' Tyle guessed.

'Old rusty hinges, sounds like.'

'That's what makes them sing!' Tyle cried - forgetting her aching finger, bleeding lip. Then froze as it struck her that the Call Tree might be in the very act of giving her an assignment. Tyle yanked her hand free of the trunk pocket. Her hand was amazingly clean, as if the tree had tasted not only blood and spit but all the dirt of the last few days. It looked like a new hand.

She wanted to show it to Gnostic but only green beads lay where the body parts had been. These beads milled on the damp mossy ground like beetles she'd seen in graffiti, flashing in the sun.

Tyle looked straight up the Call Tree, finally living up to its name, calling to the whole planet, everyone on it. Tyle no longer

doubted the bows were lifting like skirts in a strong wind. There was no wind.

Or maybe up high. But that much wind?

A deep bass rumble.

Tyle said: 'Run.'

She had no thought of her pack or fallen knife but glanced back to see Coe still staring straight up. Tyle dashed back and caught Coe by her wrist. 'Run!' She felt the tree was about to lower itself. She pictured its wide flat bows stacking up as it subsided gently into the ground and she did not want to be under them.

She was right and she was wrong. The tree came down but did not subside gently. The running girls heard and felt it dissolve, starting at the broad base, into the same green beetles Gnostic had become. Trillions of them. The weight of the tree squeezed them out from the base like a rolling green wall, a huge ripple that slammed uncomprehending Gil then rushed the fleeing girls to sweep them like leaves into its roaring flood.

Like being boiled but without heat, like being lofted by breeze but through solid ground, Tyle rolled inside the thundering wave the tree had become. She was going to be in such trouble! She had brought down the whole Call Tree, just touching it! The absurd thought was pursued by another: I'm going to die. She felt rushing green beetles in her mouth, her ears and up her nose, and knew that, eventually, she must suffocate. Tumbling, aware of moving at many kilometers per hour, she wanted for everything to end.

But was not too afraid, worried more for Coe.

Then it grew lighter, the blackness becoming the deepest glassy green she could sense, becoming a bright golden green suddenly giving way to hot blue sky. Wind beat her face; green beetles poured from her mouth. The surf of outflowing tree stuff carried her along like a Nereid. She breathed in, thrashed in the surf to face backwards, searching for Coe.

What she saw was the Call Tree, still lowering, grand and unreal, its broad base dissolving, pushing out more roaring green waves.

Then the first of the bows, elevated perpendicular to the trunk, struck the outflowing surface flat. Tyle was so far off she didn't hear the report for seconds. When it came it banged like thunder in the yard next door. Again and again the flat-out bows slammed the rushing surf, lending it new energy, pushing out new strong waves, flooding the great basin in which the tree had stood.

Borne from the center, Tyle saw more bows detach and shoot across the green-bread lake like yellow-green islands in kaleidoscopic symmetry. Then the top she had meant to climb to sank in the center of the round green lake, sending out a final round wave.

The flow rafting Tyle began to slow but not till the top of the basin was crested did she touch ground. Like a swimmer trying for a toehold, she extended her legs, dug in her heels, the beetle-green surf at her back. Then she was able to fight the current, same as in a river. The flow ebbed to her chest then her waist then held steady, up to her knees, no longer the flow of reaction but of purpose. The green beads, climbing over one another, sent their energy forward to spread around the planet.

The flat islands on the green lake sped away in all directions. Clear water fountained, filling the basin with a true lake. Staggered by it all, Tyle wept.

Her pack was lost, along with Coe's. Of her Uncle Gil there was no sign but Tyle found Coe, unconscious, already changing. Her hard black claws had partly dissolved. Maneuvering Coe to make her comfortable, Tyle knocked loose claws on fingers and toes, revealing pink baby skin. Coe's bristly black hair was

falling out. Her laddered skin trace had blurred.

Nights fell. Starlight glittered on the basin lake. Meteors drew yellow lines across the sky. Holding Coe to keep her warm, Tyle saw many meteors that night, heard colossal whumps in the distance. Once she heard a titanic splash.

In the morning the lake bore a new floating island, clustered with spheres and partly draped in a red checked fabric. The fallen bows of the former Call Tree had sailed from the center of the lake to dock along the shore.

Eventually, Tyle built a house overlooking that shore.

Tyle no longer hated, perhaps had never truly hated her uncle; but Gil and others as set in their ways, without the excuse of a rogue nology riding them, had separated the Gallagen colonists into Clean and Called, and Tyle could not let the old divisions reassert themselves. She had aromized Aunt Lan's remains and did not want to do that to Gil, her father's last kin. From her uncle, Tyle had learned stubbornness and now, oddly, for his sake, she wanted to dig in her heels.

But said, rising from the table to serve lunch, 'If you pass that way, tell the mayor to do as he likes with Gil's bones.'

Tyle cut bread. Coe and Fergus sat quietly. Then they spoke of other things and ate and laughed together.

After Coe and Fergus had left, Tyle Ryko stood on the shadier side of the house, looking out over the lake, still blue and bright with pieces of sun. Breeze rustled vines that hung to arbors and lattices. And she heard, then saw the little monkeys coming along in a troop, hopping from tree to tree, stopping to look all around like thieves, their long thin tails curled. They were thieves but Tyle grew more food than she could possibly eat and she had trained them to eat their fill and leave the rest alone. The monkeys descended on her garden, squeezing, big eyes blinking, heads nervous on their little necks, to gorge on what she had laid out - apples and tangerines, peaches, grapes and pears. The beige monkeys had white bellies, black fingers and toes. People thought it curious that Tyle alone in that area enjoyed their best behavior. Most people shooed them away.

Tonghi Tyle noticed one larger than the others, not eating, sitting on the stump of a birch a big storm had brought down. It watched sunlight dance on the lake.

Tyle approached slowly. The monkey noted her, not moving its head, only its eyes, then watched the lake. It looked sad. Was it sick? When she left sure that it wouldn't bolt, Tyle offered it a slice of sweet apple.

This melancholy monkey on the stump did not take the fruit but looked at Tyle, looked into her eyes.

And shook its head.

She remembered this. She had offered Gmista, a slice of jakka root.

Tyle said, 'No, you can't be -'

The large monkey turned and jumped, caught a tree limb, a signal for the rest of his tribe to drop what they were eating and follow. 'Hey!' cried Tyle. But they were off, swinging, leaping, chattering, making their way toward wherever they nested at night with owls and sliding snakes, with clinging possum and tree frogs and lemurs and bats in the high-up shadows where starlight gnows.

Steve was born in Pennsylvania and grew up mostly in central New York State. He ran away from high school to marry a medievalist, ending up in Canada where he wrote bad novels but caught the kindly attention of Gordon Linn at Knopf who reminded him: You have to think of the reader. Steve: Thinking of the reader. Steve published his first story in the spring of the new millennium in *On Spec* where he has since published half a dozen more stories and a handful of fine essays. This is his first appearance in *Interzone*.

The disaster is all over screens worldwide. A foreign agent, whom we may call the H'wood, has taken over Tracy Island and the secrets of the Thunderbird machines, exerting an evil mind control that jerks everyone around 'like a puppet on a string! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!



NICK LOWE



MUTANT POPCORN

FILMS



he disaster is all over screens worldwide. A foreign agent whom we may call the H'wood has taken over Tracy Island and the secrets of the Thunderbird machines exerting an evil mind control that jerks everyone around 'like a puppet on a string! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Meanwhile, the father of International Rescue is floating around somewhere in outer space in a state of grumpy anoxia, and back on set Grandma Tracy has been eliminated and replaced by Son of Brains, while Sir Ben Kingsley is trying to recreate the Hood as a study in pain and darkness worthy of a peer of the thespian realm, with a startling moment when you realise he's actually studied the puppet's head movements. Can anything be salvaged, or is this the end for International Rescue? Who, indeed, is left to rescue the rescuers?

Obviously it's been a throbbing headache for

Working Title's Thunderbirds trying to hang on to its finance as a French/US coproduction, that the product has Lord of the Rings status in the UK and zero brand recognition in the key overseas markets. The live-action version has had as bloody a development history as anything in British film, with original writer/director Peter Hewitt, who did so much to get the whole thing out of the swimming pool and into orbit limping on only as a shared original story credit while the prominent thanks to Sylvia Anderson are a subtle reminder of who else is emphatically not on board. But the fights seem to have continued to the final rounds, to judge from the clanking expository voiceover (all too obviously an addition in post-production), and what's come lumbering out of the hamper is three intercut but unrelated films. Incompatible in tone and wildly disparate in their actual yield of entertainment

Thunderbirds 2, which emerges fully to view

only in the climactic rescue, is a fairly authentic, affectionate live-action recreation of the look and storylines of the original show, with manorials falling into the Thames and tunnelling into the vault of the Bank of London (delightfully recognisable as University College with some hasty cardboard signs). This is the Thunderbirds in which Bill Paxton seems to be starring, as a completely deadpan Jeff Tracy apparently unaware that everybody around him is in different films entirely. Thunderbirds 2, in particular, seems to be piloted by a completely different team, pursuing a witty Brian Clemens homage centred on Lady Penelope and Parker. It's here and only here that the camera catches some glimpse of the gloved hand of co-writer Michael McCullers (whose name appears on the funniest script never made: regular partner Mike Myers's unrealised masterpiece Sprockets). Though the Sophia Myles version of Lady P is too

young, too naughty, and too thumpingly ironic to trace over the subtler curves of the original character, her Barbara Centert Warrior Princess interpretation is pretty consistently ironic and dismissing on its own terms, and from her first 'Hello boys' the dialogue flames into life whenever 'er ladyship's perfect lips part.

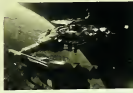
Unfortunately, neither of these likable films makes much of a dent in the running time, which instead is dominated by the uniformly dismal *Thunderbirds 3*: a staller plot in which a trio of kids are chased interminably round Tracy Island by the Hood's bungling henchpeople while the *Thunderbirds* and the rest of the cast are trusted up out of sight, and which seems to exist solely to provide limitless footage of the spectacularly fit Vanessa Hudgens legging it round the Seychelles in hotpats, in overseas markets, this may evoke nothing more dispiriting than the distant howl of the ghost of *Scooby-Doo*, but for UK audiences it screams 'Children's Film Foundation' unerringly capturing everything that patronised, underentertained young people of a certain generation spent their Saturdays being trained to despise. Nobody with the slightest sympathy for the material could ever have thought this was a good idea. It's a greivelling capitulation to the Universal suits who don't

insidious dogma of the 'emotional journey' (peerlessly the most depressing mantra in current moviespeak). Instead, *Thunderbirds* kids invest their emotions in the gear. *Thunderbirds* was the original and greatest mecha fantasy, its imaginative and merchandising appeal tied overwhelmingly to its fetishisation of the technology. The Andersons and their team understood completely, which is why their great series were all mechanymic and Captain Scarlet marked the start of decline. But *Thunderbirds* the movie seems to think that *Thunderbirds* are the pilots: a telling confusion, because the Hollywood puppeteers are unable to comprehend a narrative universe in which the characters aren't the stars.

And what's completely unforgivable about the Frakes version here is the failure to serve up a full platter of the no-brainer money shots which should have been non-negotiable. We do eventually see all five *Thunderbirds* in use, plus a reasonable selection of pod-fliers (and an anorexic-friendly warehouse shot of the rest, suitable for pausing on the DVD), and there's even an updated version of T3 doing the naughty with T5. But the great launch sequences are sadly abbreviated, and the magnificent ritual of spotting the pilots into their machines is almost completely elided.

Above all, despite adequately well-staged rescue sequences in prologue and climax, there simply isn't anything like enough *Thunderbird* action, while nobody is going to be arguing over who gets to be Virgil if the elder brothers get no differentiation at all. And just to add insult, Hans Zimmer's score begins on the worse possible footing by chopping up Barry Gray's original theme (shamefully undercredited) and reassembling a hideously deformed recut of the melody over the obligatory bad dance beat. You know it's going to turn out unhappily from the flagrant breach of the no-photography rule in the opening scenes; and yet there are survivor moments that give a poignant glimpse of how much could so easily have been rescued. ➤

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understand why anyone would want to make a *Thunderbirds* film and so have done their best to make an entirely different film instead.

Yet it is not that arcing the storyline around Alan Tracy's coming of age, as an alternative prequel to the TV origin story, was a particularly bad idea in itself. True, you need to grit teeth quite hard through the fairly inevitable father/son business (a non-refundable introduction fee to Hollywood partners) and some gruesome stuff about IR's origins in a distinctively masculine reflex of coping with bereavement. He built these machines because he let your mother die, explains the Hood, or as Lady P puts it more indolently in an aside to Tiar-Tin, 'Doat boys just love their toys? But in fact, there's real emotional truth here. The target audience are a community stoically resistant to the H'wood doctrine of identification which insists a children's film has to have juvenile leads, or the

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still weirder conjoinment is the bizarre *Around the World in 80 Days* a surreally postmodern mutation in which Passepartout is not the real thing but a disguise assumed by a Jackie Chan character who (quite cleverly as it goes) is none other than the shadowy bank robber doppelgänger from Verne's novel. The strange result is a mid-budget remake of the 1956 version handcuffed to a martial arts stunt comedy in which Verne's storyline (not completely ignored) goes out 39 stepping with an archetypal off-the-shelf Jackie Chan plot involving Chinese warlords a stolen jade statuette and scorpion tattooed ninja assassins. In the midst of all this it seems almost normal to have Phileas Fogg played by Steve Coogan adrift in a globe spanning stew that includes a Hong Kong star Irish director German money French co-star a supporting infrastructure of UK character players and ethnic cameos from assorted Hollywood food chains including the Austrian Governor of California playing a Turk.

All seems harmless enough and the thirty children I saw it with were a lot more entertained through its risky two-hour running time than the kids at *Thunderbirds* or *Spider*

Men. But I'm less and less sure that this relentless steampunking of history is an entirely victimless crime. In the out of copyright world before characters had rights everything is malleable. So *Around the World* cheerfully dissolves Verne's very specific 1872 into an anachronous soup. Before the Turn of the Century (as the opening epistle has it) collapsing the entire nineteenth century into a Young Einstein parallel universe in which everyone whose dates you can't remember are contemporaries and everything that's ahistorical is ironic. But the handling both of Verne and of history is at the very least probing the limits of innocent fun. While there's mad amusement value in the villainous henchpeers being Rhodes Salisbury and Kitchner (credits sic) the casting of William Kelvin as a full-blooded English aristocratic baddie brings on a distinct shaffle of unease. Yet the age of steam is a distant land beyond the reach of copyright law so there's nobody to sue and if Jackie Chan can smuggle himself into a Vernean voyage extraordinaire why stop there? Let's have Adam Sandler impersonate Dr Watson, Chris Rock as Professor Cavor or (giggle) how about Hugh Jackman as Abraham van — ehem ah yes well



Meanwhile some of *Thunderbirds* autoimmune infection has got into the summer's other revisioning of material from the same mid-sixties golden age of mythopoeia. *Spider-Man 2* is about as radical a sequel as the Iron hand of franchise will allow it to be slow lachrymose unenthralling actually with as little *Spider-Man* in it as the audience can be persuaded to tolerate and much of that little consigned to crudely obvious CG. Instead this instalment throws all of its massive weight of summer sequel expectations on to Peter Parker — nothing together Spidey's temporary loss of his spider-mojo in *Amazing Spider-Man 12* (Unmasked by Doctor Octopus!) with Peter's big Act II Moment of Reincarnation from #50 (*Spider-Man No More!*) where it all gets a bit on top of him and he opts out of the franchise altogether. So for most of the film it's back on with the new glasses back up half an octave for the voice and fingers crossed that the audience would rather watch this character than an animated puppet in primary coloured spandex doing his *Überfarzen* thing through Manhattan.

It's not a completely barmy movie because Tobey Maguire is still absolutely magnificent at Peter Parker and a complete waste of screen



All seems harmless enough, and the thirty children I saw it with were a lot more entertained through its risky two-hour running time than the kids at *Thunderbirds* or *Spider-Man*. But I'm less and less sure that this relentless steampunking of history is an entirely victimless crime

space on *Spider-Man*. It could be anyone under that mask, and given Tobey's own collection of back issues probably is — which is presumably why the emphasis on doing all Spidey's actor-friendly emotional scenes with the mask off an element casually retained long after the original unmasking plotline is development toast. And though most of the principals seeming to go through the film with permanent conjunctivitis, the performances themselves are if anything better than ever. Rosemary Harris makes a super-sized meal of her own beefed-up screentime, and though the film's version of Mary Jane Watson remains a weepy travesty of the character with whom she happens to share a name and hair colour, Raimi's team know perfectly well that they were insanely lucky to sign Kirsten Dunst in the first place, and you can't blame them for trying to find her things to do besides scream on the end of a wire (which it

If there's a spare dinner going in all this, it's Freddie Molina's dangerously amiable Doc Ock, who knows when he's outclassed and politely makes space for these relentlessly watchable leads by wandering discreetly off to his evil lab for entire acts at a time



must be said she continues to do extremely well)

If there's a spare dinner going in all this it's Freddie Molina's dangerously amiable Doc Ock who knows when he's outclassed and politely makes space for these relentlessly watchable leads by wandering discreetly off to his evil lab for entire acts at a time. It's something of a relief to see the character finally on screen at all having already been in and out of the first film as early as the later James Cameron drafts and as late as the early David Koepp ones. But this interpretation is the fiercest of them all from Lee & Ditko's original creation: a thoroughly nice chap who's just unlucky enough to rewire himself with fifteen foot segment tentacles of evil that do the Gollum end of the conversation in his head. It was a wise move to stomp up for an RSC man because some of the Doc's lines are worthy of Stan the Man himself. Something in

my head — something telling! The inhibitor chip — gone! All the same, a Doctor Octopus who can be gently talked at the climax into doing the decent thing is a fairly unrecognisable figure to those of us who spent our Latin lessons drawing this character at the back of the class and one more sign that Raimi's hold on the Spider-Man mythos is slipping.

For film is an impatient medium with constant pressure to dash in your assets, resolve sexual tension, unmask secret identities, hook your characters up. This isn't the way that made Marvel mighty and it was Spider-Man's resistance to easy resolution that made the title great for as long as it was. But the film version's sudden surrender on all three fronts at the end of 2 doesn't bode at all well for the already committed 3 and 4 and is symptomatic of a larger clash between Hollywood values and the original material in which Hollywood wins this



round hands down. Just because you've got good actors doesn't mean you should let them spend the film acting while the psychosomatic origins of Peter's ejection dysfunction (in ASM2 it was a touch of flu) are a further step in the surrender of narrative to the self-help industry. Am I not supposed to have what I want? he ponderously ponders. What I need? — thoughts all too likely to have occurred to other NYU students who similarly to hold down two jobs and keep up with classwork, without the consolation of being the city's web-slinging hero. All in all it's neither the best nor the worst of the summer sequel season — honours which go respectively to Harry Potter's remarkable series high and the weekly conceived, slapdashy paced and clonily plotted Shrek 2. But somewhere on a secret island in the south Pacific, a light is flashing red on an instrument panel. Is anybody there to answer the call?



They're dead now, the Be'nans. Tri'ku was the last to die. Her body hangs in my arms,
as heavy as my guilt, as my footsteps echo in these empty alien streets. And soon we'll
be gone from this world too. I'm the last human in this bizarre, beautiful city.
Tan is still here with me--but she's already dead.

Enlightenment

Douglas Smith



The High Places rise above me: two bone-white curves sweeping hundreds of feet
into a morning sky from opposite ends of the city, bending inwards like two impossible
fingers yearning to touch. Built by generations of Be'nans and now only a body length
apart at their lofty tips, the High Places reach for each other.

But they don't meet, don't connect.

Not yet.

I'll go to them soon, to try to keep a promise. If I fail, and if Ta'ku was right, then what happened here will happen on another world. And another.

But first I must prepare Ta'ku in the manner of her people. She used to laugh when I called her Ta'ku, a name never meant for a human throat. Little here was meant for humans. We aren't capable of understanding. Beside me, Fan nods in agreement.

My first view of the planet Be'na came just before our attack: from orbit, on the darkened observation deck of the MCEs *Amstel*, a Merged Corporate Entity ship, manned by RIP Force soldiers of which I was one. I stood with Colonel Keys, staring at the white-green swirls of the planet on the viewport that covered the bulkhead wall. Fan sat at my feet, unseen by Keys.

Unseen, too Fan was a ghost. I thought of her as a ghost, anyway. One that only I could see. My ghost. My guilt ghost. The alternative was that I was insane, and she existed only in my mind. I had not entirely ruled out that possibility.

The screen lit Keys's profile in hard, cold lines. 'Did you know, Captain, that these *rips* once had interstellar capability?' Gave it all up over five hundred Earth years ago,' he said.

Ips: I P's. Indigenous Peoples. A Ripper slur for aliens. RIPs: Relocation of IPs, wherever they interfered with planned Entity operations, in this case mining. Survey teams had pegged Be'na as rich in an isotope of berkelium, a rare trans-uranium element and a key material in the shielding for Ullman-Gulmouir interstellar drives. But I'd been with the Force long enough to know that RIP held more truth as a word than as initials. 'Relocate' was open to interpretation. Fan's people had been relocated. Fan began appearing to me shortly after that.

I'd heard about Be'nan technology. 'Do we know why, sir?'

He shrugged. 'Dunno. They've reverted to a very simple life style. But from the terraforming and climate control we've seen, they still have technology available some where.' Another shrug. 'Doesn't matter. They've no military capability.'

No way to protect themselves from us, I knew he meant. Just like Fan's people. I called her Fan. I didn't know her name. Her people had lived on Fandor IV. They were dead now. Fan was humanoid, but her red hair and the pointed snout and ears gave her a feral look. She was young, maybe four or five, about three feet tall, and reminded me of a stuffed puppy I had as a kid.

The screen switched to an image of an adult Be'nan of unknown gender. Thin, stick-like. Bony face, lots of angles. No hair. Wide eyes, black on silver. Nustri holes over thin lips. Long purple gown, unadorned, straight lines, silky sheen.

Keys sorted. 'Not much to look at. At least they're tall. Bug buildings, high ceilings.' High enough for reuse by us. And empty after we did what RIP did, so we wouldn't waste time and money making our own shelters. The Entity expected a high return from a project world. 'Landing fleet ready?' Keys asked.

Fan's earflaps opened wide. I avoided her eyes. 'Yes, sir. You still need to set their dosage levels for Screem, sir.'

'Level two for pilots, five for the surface teams,' he said. Level five – full combat hits. I patted any Be'nan that

resisted. I saluted and headed off to CommCon to release the dosages, hoping Fan would stay behind. No such luck. The elevator shuttled open, and she stood staring at me, tears running from those big brown eyes. She remembered what RIP did to her people. What Screem made them do. Made me do.

Think of human emotions as a sine wave function: valleys of pain, peaks of pleasure. The greater your joy, the higher the peak; the greater your pain, the deeper the valley. Screem took valleys and flipped them, made them peaks too. Screemers reacted to events based solely on the intensity of the resulting emotion. Pain brought pleasure, grief gave joy, horror rendered ecstasy.

On Screem, killing was an emotional orgasm. Some nasty side effects, such as a lack of concern about exactly who you killed, meant we weren't given Screem until after military discipline programming in boot camp. RIP kept senior officers clean, but every Ripper below Major was addicted. Withdrawal was long and painful – and fatal. RIP was our only source, keeping us loyal and obedient.

Screemers burnt out fast on RIP work, so they rotated us off every six months. Or sooner, if we showed unusual stress symptoms – like trying to kill yourself on Fandor IV. In my rehab role as Security Officer, my dosage was just enough to avoid withdrawal, but not enough to let me enjoy my depression.

The elevator opened on CommCon. Returning salutes, I walked to the control board. Fan's eyes burned into me as I punched the commands to administer Screem to the landing fleet via the life support systems in their field suits. I informed Keys, and a moment later he barked the landing order over the intercom.

With Fan sobbing silently beside me, I watched in the viewport as our ships swarmed from the main bay, descending on Be'na like a plague of black shining locusts.

I enter the Place of Judgement, the *be'tig'lacht*, the sole Be'nan structure I've found without windows. Only the Be'nan judges, the *be'ti*, saw what was done here. The single, vaulted chamber, tall even by Be'nan standards, is thick with the smoke of torches and the sweet fumes of the *do'aran'qwa* bubbling in a vat beneath the blackened floor boards. Fan peeks from behind my legs, not wanting but wanting to be in this place.

Ta'ku taught me what was done here. I lay her in the Frame of Judging, the *tig'thar*. I'm not worthy to judge any Be'nan, let alone Ta'ku, but I owe her this. The *ba'aran*, the Book of Forms, lies on a stone table. From it, I choose a *do'aran*, a pose, for her upper body. Her cold flesh makes my hands tremble as I position her arms in the High Form – raised above her in two curves, hands just touching at the fingertips. It represents the completion of the High Place: the form reserved for the most holy. Ta'ku wouldn't approve, but Fan nods her agreement.

I plan to arrange Ta'ku's spindly legs, not in accordance with any form in the Book, but rather to fit her final resting place, her *do'lach*. To the Be'nans, the pose and the pose became one, together forming the final judgment of a Be'nan.

Yesterday, in Be'nan tradition, I climbed to the place I've chosen, to make an exact cast of where she'll rest. My clothes are torn from that climb, blood crusting on my knees and arms. I washed the cuts on my hands, but

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JAY LAKE'S

DREAMS OF THE WHITE CITY

END
OF
THE
ROAD

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they burn and bleed whenever I use them. Staring at the wounds, I think of crucifixion.

I carry the mould I made from the cast to the frame of judging where Ta'klu hangs. Fan urges me on, but the Be'nan sun climbs halfway up the High Places before I've attached the mould to the frame and positioned Ta'klu's legs properly within it.

I step back, judging how I've judged her. I'm not pleased, for there's no pleasure in this duty, but I'm satisfied that I've met my intent. I remove the mould from the frame, and crank open the vat of the *do'ar'jar*, the milky liquid used in this ceremony. As I wound the winch that lowers Ta'klu into the vat, her position on the frame reminds me again of crucifixion, of her, of an entire race – with us placed beside and below them as thieves. Fan bows her head in a final goodbye to Ta'klu.

Keys chose the city nearest to the berkelum deposits as our base of operations. As it turned out, that was the main city of the Be'nans – *kac'ona'jen* *Tacke*, the Place of the High Places.

Dropping forces outside the city, we secured the perimeter before landing in the main square. Twenty LASHers – Low-altitude attack ships – hovered above for emphasis. Unnecessary emphasis. To say that the Be'nans offered no resistance would be misleading. They seemed completely indifferent to our presence – just as well for them with every Ripper on full combat dosage.

We moved troops into the buildings forming the main square. I didn't ask Keys what he had done with the original Be'nan occupants. I knew. Fan knew too. Her eyes accused, condemned.

The next morning, I walked with Keys through the city. Fan stayed well back – she didn't like being close to Keys. Be'nan architecture, at least in this city, had an air of delicacy and openness. Most buildings were two or three stories, often with no walls, simply a domed roof resting on tapering pillars or thin arching supports. Where walls were used, they consisted more of window than wall, in a variety of locations and geometric shapes. The predominant color was white, accented by purple cone flowers and the blue-green of a vine that seemed to grow as it wished. The air was heavy with the musky fragrance of the flowers.

Above the city, large gray balloon-shaped creatures drifted. The project file identified them as mammalian, levitating by abdominal gas sacks. Other Rippers shut down several before the herd floated out of range. Fan cried at each corpse we passed.

But the dominant feature of the city were the statues, life-size Be'nan figures in an endless variety of poses and locations, carved from some smooth, milky material. 'Their sculpture arts seem rather limited,' I said. Oblivious to us, two tall Be'nans, some of the few remaining in the city, paused before a statue and bent forward to touch their foreheads to it. Looking for Fan, I was surprised to find her crouched before a statue, head bowed.

Keys grunted, then nodded his head at the two huge white arches that loomed over the city. 'Had a squad check those out. You know what they're made of?' Not waiting for any guess on my part, he jerked a thumb at a statue. 'Those things. Can you believe it? They've built those damn arches from statues. One by one, fit together

like a giant jigsaw puzzle.' He moved on.

I stared up at the High Places, trying to fathom how many statues would have been needed to build the looming fingers. Hundreds of thousands, maybe millions, each carved to fit with those placed before, slowly rising to the sky, reaching to touch each other. How many generations ago had it begun? And why?

Suddenly, that question was important, as if an answer would explain why I felt so apart from RLP, so disconnected. As if the space between those tips was the distance between myself and the world around me. Just then, the sun peeked over the High Places, melting the shadow where I stood. Beside me, Fan stared at the arches, her face as sad as ever, and yet peaceful. She nodded.

Removed from the vat, Ta'klu has hardened in the pose I gave her. The liquid has saturated her body, mummifying and encasing her corpse in a super-hard, super-light shell. She stands before me again, but now as a *be'nan'ta*, a Judged One. I polish her white surface with ceremonial rubbing creams until she gleams. Her face is turned to the heavens, eyes hidden behind this shell. Fan backs away. Yes, Fan, now we've truly lost her. Somehow, while her body appeared as in life, she was still here with us. Now, she's become a thing. Only my duty to her remains.

I prepare to transport her to her final resting-place. Although she stood a head above me in life, in this pose she's below me in stature, so that I'll be able to carry her. I smile. Below me in stature? In physical stature only.

After attaching straps to her arms, I turn and reach back to grasp the straps. Hunching forward, I pull on the straps to lift her onto my back. She's heavy, I shrug her weight further up until her feet clear the ground enough to let me walk nearly upright. Moving to the door, bearing her like my cross, I step onto the silent streets where Fan already waits.

Keys and I explored much of the Be'nan city that first day. Fan tagged along behind, keeping her distance from Keys. He was mostly silent. I knew that the Be'nans' reaction to our presence, or rather lack of reaction, had unnerved him. He scanned each alcove we passed, as if expecting a belated uprising to begin here. We turned a corner onto a side street. And stopped.

On this street, sculpted arms rose from the pavement itself, twisting and writhing upwards like frozen serpents. Hands clutched, fingers clawed, as if grasping at something, anything, to tear themselves free of some hidden hell. Upright statues lined this street as we had seen throughout the city, but with their backs turned to this display of pleading arms. Behind us, not daring to enter the street, Fan peeked around a pillar.

Keys and I walked slowly along that strange avenue, weaving a path among the arms. Between each pair, rising just enough out of the pavement to be discernible, lay an upturned sculpted face.

Perhaps it was the silence of that street or the Be'nans' indifference to our power – or the expressions on those faces. Whatever the reason, Keys kicked suddenly at an arm. Despite the sculpture's delicate appearance, his attack had no effect, beyond generating a pained look on his face and a mournful bell tone that echoed down the narrow lane. He stood there in silence, his hands clenching and



unclenching. Then he drew his *Tanzer* and fired a thin beam at the arm. The arm glowed blue as I felt the radiated heat. Keys holstered his gun and kicked the arm again.

This time, it broke off with a snap. He picked it up, staring at the broken end. I heard him murmur 'My God.' Then he waved me over. 'Captain, look at this.'

He handed me the arm, and I examined the end. Instead of the solid substance I expected, the outer whiteness of the arm appeared to be merely a shell. I stared at the contents inside. Although Be'nan physiology differed from ours in many respects, I'd seen enough dismembered corpses in RIP to know that I was looking at bone and mummified flesh

I've carried Ta'klu only a small way through the empty city and already I'm tiring. Lowering her to the pavement, I slump against her, resting a moment between the twisted upraised arms here on one of the *mephi'ou*, a Street of the Low Ones. Fan huddles close to me, sensing the evil in this place.

Elsewhere in the city, Judged Ones appear in a *li do'nam*, a pose of pursuit, placed so that passersby must look up to them. Those are the majorities – not saints, not devils – just good people. Could humans say that of our own race? Fan shakes her head. But the Streets of the Low Ones interred those judged to be impure, to have regressed from birth on a path to Enlightenment. They were placed beneath the feet

of the people, most of their encased bodies hidden, imbedded into the actual roadway.

Such a judgement was never given lightly. Any Be'nan that gave it would rest here as well after death, lining this street, their back turned to the display, a symbol that the Be'nan people rejected the lives of those interested here.

I know each face, each story. Here lies Ves'wa, who opened the way for the Ones Who Watch, from where Ta'klu's ancestors had banished them eons ago – and to where they were retained after the Battle of the Terrible Silence. There I can see the twisted beauty of Ne'to, whose passion for lovers was equaled solely by a passion for adornments made from those lovers. Beside her lies Ke'bi, who danced with the Dead Things in the City With No Name. And there, in a darkened alcove, segregated even from these, is Der'syok, a judge himself, who let a desire for artistic impression override objectivity in the poses he gave.

Fan pleads with me to leave here. Sighing, I rise and take up my burden again. For there's another class of Judged Ones: the Be'nan equivalent of saints or bodhisattvas, those who achieved Enlightenment. The Be'nan reserved a special location for the Enlightened. I raise my eyes to the High Places.

The next day, to the surprise of all, Keys halted the removal of the Be'nan from the city. He called me to the house that we'd appropriated for RIP HQ. News of the true nature of the statues had spread quickly among the Rippers. A wariness now replaced their arrogance, an unease amplified by the ubiquity of its source: the statuary, literally surrounded us at every turn. Walking from the officers' quarters, I passed several toppled and smashed statues. Fan paused at each one, touching it, head down.

I found Keys in the Ops room, a central airy dome supported by arching buttresses and speckled with high windows. He paced beside a stone slab that now served as a map table. I noted that someone had removed the two statues that had stood on the slab. "You stopped the relo," I said, feeling Fan's eyes burn into me. Relocation. Even after all the RIP missions I'd been on, all I had seen and done, I still couldn't call it what it was.

Keys stopped pacing and pinned me with a stare. "I've been talking to a head honcho ip. Some sort of priest caste."

"Talking, sir?" I asked.

Fan grew suddenly still beside me.

"Talking. As in what we are doing right now."

I was shocked. With no earlier direct contact with this culture, we had estimated a year to figure out their language. "CommOps has made remarkable progress."

Keys snorted. "Those cretins? They'd still be pointing to bolos and building goddam syntax charts." He shook his head. "The ips did it. Yesterday, this Tatoo or Takoo or something, she walks in here – at least I think she's a she – and just starts yapping. Perfect Entry Seemard English." He plopped into a chair beside the map table and motioned me to another.

I sat, and Fan curled on the floor. "What did she want?"

"After yesterday, the men started breaking those . . . things," he said. I knew he meant the statues. "She wanted us to stop."

"That's their first reaction to anything we've done. What did you tell her, sir?"

"I agreed. I ordered the men to cease and desist." RIP Colonels neither sought nor took counsel from ips. My face must have shown my surprise. Keys leaned forward. "She doesn't just know our language, Captain – she even knew our slang. Called us Rippers, talked about ips, Tanzers, LASHers."

I hesitated. "That could be a result of how they learned our language. They must be recording our conversations, then applying sophisticated pattern recognition and context AI."

"She knew that we're here for the berkelium."

"The men might have talked about that."

"She used our MICE project code. Only you and I know that."

That stopped me. "Maybe they hacked into our shop systems?"

"There's more. She knew stuff about me that isn't on our systems. Stuff from my childhood. Little things, trivial, not something I likely ever told anybody in RIP."

Again I felt the isolation and loneliness that had flooded me on first seeing the High Places. I felt suddenly naked, exposed to the alienness of this world. "Telepathy, perhaps?"

He shook his head. "I didn't even remember that stuff until she said it. So I thought it best to agree to her request, until we know more." He looked at me. "Which is where you come in."

"Me, sir?" I replied, as Fan's ears snapped up.

"I want you to be our liaison with these ips, through this one. Find out what you can about them, what else they know about us. And, goddamn it, *how* they know it."

"Why me, sir?"

Keys frowned. "You're my ZIC, and our security officer."

Fan shook her head. He was hiding something, I swallowed. "If I'm to succeed, sir, I need to know everything about this."

Keys glared at me, clenching and unclenching his hands, just like he had done before he shot the arm on that street the day before. "All right, Captain. She asked for you. By name."

The vines now cover these silent streets. They part before us as we walk, showing me the way though my goal hangs clear and bright above me. They know who I carry.

We pass many Judged Ones, toppled by Rippers. They stand once more, resurrected, raised up by the vines, broken limbs held in place by blue-green coils, cracked wounds concealed behind leafy veils. Fan tilts her head as the wind mutters in the rustle of the vines, giving voice to dead Be'nan. I know the words they whisper. All life here knows the deed that was done.

And the price the Be'nan chose to pay, in vain, for us.

Keys led me from the Ops room to a garden inside the HQ house. I was surprised to find the garden, untended for only two days since our occupation, already overgrown. Vines choked the paths, and a pungent scent of flowers hung like an unseen curtain. A tall Be'nan stood between two arching fountains.

A vision of the High Places came unbidden to me. In it, this Be'nan hovered suspended between them, as if those strange great fingers were pointing at her, indicating her. Then she stretched out long thin arms to touch both ips, bridging the narrow gap, finally completing the High

Places. Or did she hang crucified on them?

The vision vanished. I turned to ask Keys a question and found him gone. Turning back, I jumped, startled to find the Be'nan now standing beside me.

She touched the fingertips of both her hands together in an arch before her, the Be'nan greeting, then repeated the gesture but facing slightly to my left. I turned. Fan stood there, staring up at the Be'nan, lips pulled back in the smile of her people. I'd never seen Fan smile. This so struck me that it was several seconds before I realized the implication of what just happened. I turned to the Be'nan. 'You . . . you can see her?' The Be'nan just smiled a very human smile. I cleared my throat. 'My name is Jarrod,' I said, not knowing what else to say.

She spoke a sound, her name I supposed. Clicks and bird songs to me. 'Ta'klu?' I offered, like a child before a teacher.

She smiled again. 'That will do.'

So began our friendship. And the end of a world.

My muscles burn and scream, but I refuse to rest here. Fan runs ahead, anxious to leave this place behind. Even the vines avoid this street. Here the killing started. Here the Ta'lonae, the huge gas-bag creatures, were slaughtered. Their corpses drape statues and buildings, and cover the street. Their flesh doesn't rot in the normal way. It liquefies into a thick grease that drips around me and on me, making the street slick and treacherous with the load I carry. The stench, sickly sweet like some strange spice, is overpowering.

As are my memories. I struggle on to where Fan waits.

I lived with Ta'klu from the day we met, spending all my time with her. I don't know if that had been Keys's expectation, but once we met, it never occurred to me to do otherwise. Ta'klu never explained why she had asked for me, nor why she gave me what she did – more than just all of her time, I received her complete attention, her focus. She took me everywhere in the city, taught me of their culture, their history, their beliefs.

And of a thing called Enlightenment.

'What is it?' I asked Ta'klu one day as we walked in the city, Fan scampering around each vine-covered pillar we passed.

'Your people will call it omniscience, but it is less than that – and more. It is connecting as one with life around you.'

'On Be'na?' I asked, touching a statue as we passed. 'And beyond.' She raised a long thin hand as I opened my mouth to protest. 'More I cannot tell you, Jarrod. Not yet.'

'Is it something that humans can aspire to?'

'Your people will desire it.'

'But can we achieve it?'

She looked at me for several breaths. 'We do not yet know.'

'Then can you give it to us?'

'We can open a way,' she said, smiling down at Fan.

'Keys will want it,' I said. Fan stopped, suddenly solemn.

'Yes,' Ta'klu replied.

'Will you give it to him?'

'Can a broken cup hold an ocean?'

I took that as a 'no'. But I knew RIP and the lengths

to which Keys would go. Fan looked up at me. I thought of her people, wiped out by RIP, and my role in that. And I decided. I resolved to withhold all that I learned of Enlightenment from Keys, though I knew that if he discovered this, I'd be court-martialed. Fan smiled. She smiled a lot lately. I liked it.

In those early weeks, Ta'klu showed me what it meant to be Be'nan. Then Keys showed us what it meant to be human.

I awoke one morning to the sizzle of Tanzer fire. Fan stood at an arched window in the room in Ta'klu's house where I slept, gesturing to me. I rose and walked over. A swarm of Ta'lonae hovered above a nearby street, circled by a ring of LASHers. The shimmering around each ship told me that they had their shields set at a wide dispersal; they were herding the Ta'lonae. For the slaughter.

Houses blocked my view of the next street, but Tanzer beams flamed upwards. No pattern, just Rippers firing at will. When hit, most Ta'lonae would rupture and float down like a huge leaf. But every so often, one exploded loudly in flames, to a chorus of cheers, as the gas inside the creature's sac ignited. Fan jumped at each explosion, and the herd screeched in mournful whistles.

I felt Ta'klu beside me. 'So it begins,' she said.

'You expected this?'

Her eyes lifted skyward, the Be'nan equivalent of a nod.

'But why? Keys stopped them doing this before.'

'He has learned of Enlightenment.'

I swallowed. 'Ta'klu, I've told him nothing.'

Smiling, she laid a spidery hand on my shoulder. 'I know.'

I considered that as I watched the killing continue. 'How

do you know?' I asked. When no answer came, I turned and found myself alone. Below me, Ta'klu and Fan emerged onto the street and headed in the direction of RIP HQ. I rushed to follow them.

Keys stood in the Ops room with three Rippers – two sergeants and a lieutenant – facing Ta'klu. Keys fixed me with a look I didn't much like, then returned my salute. The others saluted me only after glancing to Keys. He pointed me to a chair. The other Rippers remained standing, and I knew he'd discovered my duplicity, my failure to inform him of all that I'd learned. I was through. Fan came to stand beside me, as if in support.

Keys turned back to Ta'klu. Even on relook way, I'd never seen his eyes that hungry. 'They tell me you're the head up.'

'They?' I asked.

Keys glared at me. 'They. All of them. Any of them. You didn't discover that too? They all talk our language now. And every one I ask says the same thing – Ta'klu speaks for Be'na.'

Ta'klu bowed. 'I have been given this honor.'

'Then you have the honor of explaining to me.' Keys strode over to her. I think he regretted the move. She overreached him by a good foot, forcing him to look up to her. 'Tell me how you manage food production, terraforming, weather control – entire planetary environmental management – all with zero technology.' She did not reply. Fan crept closer to me. 'Or how you can give us exact locations of berkelium, more precisely than we can manage with our instruments – drill depths, yield percentages – again without the use of any technology?' No reply. Fan looked up at me, as if urging me to act. 'Or how you know as much about Earth and Earth history



as we do? Or how you can be in one location, then be reported in another spot, hundreds of miles away, only minutes later?

I felt that I had to do something, that it was my duty to protect her as hopeless as it was. 'You said yourself that they look the same. And their technology could be hidden -'

'Jarrod.' It was Ta'klu. She shook her head, and I stopped. She turned to Keys. 'It is called Enlightenment.'

Keys smiled, no doubt thinking he had won. 'What is it?'

'You will call it omniscience. It is not.'

Keys's smile broadened. 'Whatever I want it.'

'No,' she replied, like a parent to a petulant child.

Keys walked back to the Ops table and sat on the edge. 'Oh, I don't think you want to tell me that.' He fidgeted the StAB rod at his belt. Fan hid behind me.

Ta'klu ignored him. 'I believe your people have a saying -'

'We have lots,' he snapped. 'Like *Don't put into the wind*. We're the wind, ip, and we'll goddam blow you away.'

'I was thinking, *Beware what you wish - it may come true*.'

Keys snorted. 'Are you saving your knowledge as dangerous? That we couldn't handle it?' Snickers ran through the Rippers in the room. 'Well, sister, knowledge is power, and we deal with power every day. We carry it with us. We hold it in our hands, and we wield it as a terrible swift sword. You can't scare us.'

'Some knowledge can kill,' she said, a chill in her words.

Keys stood again. His hands were making and unmaking fists at his sides. 'So can I, ip.' His voice was low, calm and cold. 'You'll give me the secret... or I'll kill every last one of you.'

A terrible silence descended on that room, like a beast waiting to devour the next sound. Ta'klu stood in that silence, her head down. I wanted to scream at her. Tell him! You don't know what they are capable of.

She looked up at Keys. 'No,' she said.

I bowed my head. Fan stared at me, her face unreadable.

Of all the places in this tomb of a city, I didn't expect to rest here - an open-air amphitheater sunk below the ground, terraced rows sloping down to a round pool. But the bodies of the Be'nans that had filled this huge bowl are gone now, removed by the vines. Water shimmers again below as the vines refill the pool. Fan leans over the water, staring at her reflection.

I look up to the white arches that dominate this alien sky. Ta'klu's people believed that when the High Places finally met, all of Be'na would achieve Enlightenment. Would that such a gift had never been granted to the humans here.

I was court-martialed. Keys could have killed me but that would have been too kind. He had a couple of Rippers beat me up while he watched. They dumped me on the street, and he knelt down beside me grinning, while I spat out teeth and Fan cried.

'Maybe the ips won't talk, but you, Jarrod, you're going to need a hit soon. Then you'll tell me what you know.' He kicked me, then walked away laughing.

Panic seized me. RIP was my only source in Scream. Withdrawal meant weeks of agony, without the filter of Scream, then death. Fan shook her head as if to say 'No, don't worry.' Fine for you, little one. I thought. You're already dead.

In the first week after his ultimatum, Keys killed one hundred Be'nans. Chosen at random, each was taken to stand in front of Ta'klu's house. Shot with Tanzer, touched by StAB rod, knifed, hung, bludgeoned, burnt alive - Keys told his men to use a variety of methods to see if one particularly unnerved the 'ips.'

Ta'klu simply stood at her window and bowed to each victim, making the sign of the High Places with her hands. They would return the how. Then they would die, some quickly, some slowly. Fan stood quietly beside her each time, strangely calm. I pleaded with Ta'klu. 'Why do you let them die? Why don't they resist? Why doesn't someone give in, tell the secret?'

'Some do not know and so have nothing to give. Those of us who do know, know also that the secret would kill your people.'

The implication of her words hit me like a charged StAB rod. 'You die to protect us? Your killers?'

She smiled. 'One day, Jarrod, perhaps you will understand.'

That was not my only surprise in that first week. I experienced no withdrawal symptoms from Scream. When I mentioned this to Ta'klu, she just smiled. 'A gift to my student,' she replied. Fan bared her teeth at me in an I-told-you-so grin.

Keys killed a thousand the second week. Still they bowed and died. Stranger still, I perceived no change in the attitude of those Be'nans that I passed in the ever more empty streets. No panic, ensued, no resistance, no flight.

By the third week, the RIP bio-weapons team had engineered a Be'nan plague virus with a short air-borne vector. Keys must have been desperate. RIP used bio-weapons sparingly. You could never be sure of the propagation rate. Too high a rate, and bodies piled up faster than you could get rid of them. Plus they raised the risk of impact on humans and the rest of the planetary ecosystem. I explained all this to Ta'klu as Fan cried.

Keys threatened its release. Ta'klu still refused him the secret. Keys ordered it dropped on a city on the far side of the planet. A week later, a survey team to the city reported one hundred per cent kill rate. The Entity had added another nasty little bug to its product list. And Keys added a second city the next week and a third the week after that.

Still Ta'klu refused to cooperate. Still the Be'nans appeared indifferent to their own slaughter.

Then Keys must have recalled our sole earlier act that had finally prompted a reaction by the Be'nans to our presence: the destruction of the statues. But he was smart enough not to waste time toppling figures around the city.

I was awakened one morning by Ta'klu, her usual air of tranquility gone. Her head moved from side to side, a sign of agitation. 'He will destroy the ma'pen'lache, the High Places,' she said. Fan scurried about her in frantic circles.

I struggled to wake. 'Keys? What... how do you know this?'

'He is attaching mechanisms to the base of each. Explosive devices that can be detonated remotely.' Ta'klu bowed her head. 'He has won.' Fan stared at me, as if

willing me to some action.

I shook my head. 'He slaughters your living, and you do nothing. He threatens a monument to your dead, and you cave in.'

'They are more than that, Jarrod.' She turned and left.

'Ta'klu, wait,' I called after her. Rising, I went to the window as she stepped onto the street, Fan running behind her. 'What are the High Places?' I called, but Ta'klu kept walking. 'Why do you protect them but not your people?' No reply.

Again I followed her to RIP HQ. Again I found her and Fan facing Keys and his officers. Keys wore a grin that I wanted to wipe away with a Tazer. He looked startled to see me, but then the grin returned, and he turned to Ta'klu. 'Got your attention, I see,' he said. 'You call, up. What's the decision?'

'You are making a terrible mistake. You - ' Ta'klu began. Keys swore. 'Captain, radio your men to stand by to detonate.' The Captain saluted and spoke into his PerComm.

'You will die. You will all die,' Ta'klu said.

Silence choked the room. The Rippers looked at each other, but Keys laughed. 'If you had any power, you'd have used it.'

'We are protecting you.'

Keys laughed even harder, but few Rippers joined in. This planet, this city, the indifference of the Be'nans to their own genocide - all had taken their toll. 'Protecting us! How kind.' His smile died. 'Last chance, up.' He nodded to the captain who raised his PerComm again, but Ta'klu froze him with a look.

'Very well,' she said. 'I warned you. Remember that. She looked at me, and suddenly her voice whispered inside my head. I had never experienced that before. You, Jarrod, I will shield. A role remains for you. To you, I grant the boom of ignorance. Raising her hands, she touched them together over her head. Like the High Places, I thought, as Fan hid behind me. Every object, every person in the room began to brighten, to glow as with some inner light. 'I grant you . . . ' Ta'klu cried. . . . Enlightenment!'

We turn onto another Street of the Low Ones - and he's there. Keys. He lies among the twisted arms and grasping hands, face up, his own arms outspread. He has crucified himself, driving a spike through each of his feet and through his left hand into the ground. A mallet lies beside his right hand. He mutilated himself first, his crotch a bloody mess, and gouged out his eyes. Fan looks away while I pause long enough to urinate on him.

A while later, we reach the nearer of the High Places.

One month after the plague release and a mere week after the 'gifting' of Enlightenment, I walked an empty city searching for food, Fan beside me. The only Terrans we found were corpses, all obvious suicides - hanging from archways by ropes or vines about their necks, lying headless with Tanzeers in hand, impaled on the broken arms of statues. Fan wouldn't look at them. I hadn't found Keys yet and wondered if he too numbered among the dead.

That night, I sat beside Ta'klu as she lay dying. She hadn't eaten since her gifting to the Rippers, and the plague had finally touched her. Fan stood, head bowed, on her other side.

The east wall of Ta'klu's room was just a series of pillars through which a cold wind now blew. In that direction, you could see the High Places reaching for each other against a starry sky. With an effort that was painful to watch, she turned to gaze at them. 'I die, my people die, with our great work unfinished.'

'What are the High Places?' I asked. 'What is their power?'

Her gaze never left those great arches, but she smiled. 'No power beyond what a symbol can hold. You know the power of a symbol, don't you, Jarrod?'

Fan made the sign of the cross, and I nodded.

'The ma'pen'lache represent an entire race and its resolve,' Ta'klu whispered. 'A people complete, connected in a belief, in a noble goal: to regain awareness of the universal life force, an awareness we hold at birth, but soon forget. In one moment, to be part of all life in all places. To be one with the creator.'

'Is that Enlightenment?'

'That is what it would be, once all life has achieved it. What some of us achieved is only what an individual may aspire to, but less than an entire race, and much less than what all of life could do. And as each who had reached Enlightenment died, the ma'pen'lache grew.'

'What did you give to Keys and his men?'

'What was mine to give. A universal body exists: a web connecting all living things, across time, across space. Life is not the sum of those living things, but the web itself. We cannot know life until we can see the web, feel the strands that join us to each other, to everything. That is Enlightenment.'

I swallowed. 'You let them touch the web.'

She turned to me then. 'Yes.'

'And they were given knowledge of the life around them.'

'And their place in that web of life, and the knowledge that life had of them,' she finished.

I began to say that I didn't understand, then her words connected with a part of me that seemed to be born in that moment. *The knowledge that life had of them.*

She knew my thoughts. 'Yes, Jarrod. The most dangerous encounter is with a perfect mirror. A mirror that shows us as the universe sees us. As we truly are.' She collapsed further into the pillows. 'Your people saw the place that they had chosen in the web. Saw each life they took, each strand they broke. They saw how life regarded them: a thing apart, disconnected from the universal body, an invading disease.' She closed her eyes. 'And they saw the cure.'

'Why did you protect me?'

A smile lived briefly on her lips. 'I know your place in the web.' Beside her, Fan nodded and looked at me, smiling.

'What do you mean?'

'A task remains. You remain. The two become one.'

'Ta'klu, no more riddles. Tell me what to do,' I pleaded.

'I cannot. You must find the way. It is part of the task.'

'But I'm no less a murderer than the others who were here.'

'Who better to lead the way through darkness than one who has lived in the night?'

'I don't have the strength.'

Her eyes opened for what was to be the last time, to look at me. 'You have more than you know. Promise me you will try.'

I swallowed, barely able to speak, feeling Fan's eyes burn into me, waiting for my reply. 'I promise,' I said to Ta'klu.

She smiled, perhaps recalling when we met. 'That will do.'

She died with the light of day, never speaking another word. Laying her hands on her chest, I looked up. Fan stood at a pillar, staring at the morning sun rising beneath where the High Places strained to touch, to become one. Become one.

The two become one, Ta'klu had said. I looked down at her body, knowing then what I must do.

My climb with Ta'klu up the High Places has taken hours. The Be'nans bore their honored Judged Ones by this path for centuries, adding to the structure death by death, but none would have come alone as I have. The initial climb was almost vertical, up steps meant for longer Be'nan legs. I'm cold and exhausted, but each time I stop to rest and drink from my flask, Fan urges me forward again, jumping up and down, pointing ahead.

Now at last I near the tip of this finger. The rise has leveled off, but this final part of my journey is the most dangerous. More than one thousand feet above the ground, the finger narrows and slopes to each side. The light is failing, and my footing is unclear. A rising wind sways the High Places, threatening to rip me from my perch. It moans between the dead beneath me, each moan the voice of a ghost, accusing, condemning.

Another fifty feet. The wind's too strong. I set Ta'klu down and crawl forward, pulling her behind me. Thirty feet. She catches in the spaces and on other statues, and I must go back again and again to free her. Twenty feet. Ten. I can see her resting-place. I move behind to push her the final few feet.

We reach the tip. Now I must stand again, lifting her by the straps, to position her feet above the exact spot, her arms reaching out towards the other side. Fighting against each gust of wind, I lower her inch by inch toward her do'lach. I strain to see past her, to see if her outstretched hands will bridge the gap. She settles into place, her legs melding exactly with the limbs and torsos of those who went before, entwined like lovers. And her arms reach for the other side as if in prayer. But they don't touch. The High Places don't meet, don't become one. They stay disconnected. And somehow, so do I.

I sink to my knees. The wind carries my cries away, making my grief as impotent as my effort to complete the High Places. But in the wind I hear words, a voice, Ta'klu's voice. I look up. Fan stands at the tip of the other finger, arms stretched towards me. I consider the distance across the span. No more than an arm's length. Could I touch the other side? If I crawl out, balancing on Ta'klu's arms. If I don't fall. If the wind doesn't pluck me off. If Ta'klu will support me in her arms.

Despite my grief and pain, I smile at this last thought and decide. She wouldn't let me fall. I'll try.

Crawling on my belly, my legs gripping each side of the tip, I begin to inch my way out to the end. I can't say why I'm doing this. It just seems right. A way of bringing closure before... Before what?

Before I leave. I realize then that I'd clung here not just to lay Ta'klu to rest, but to kill myself. I intended to throw myself from this height, final payment for the crime that we've done here. But somehow I know that my death wouldn't be repayment: it would be an escape - from a

debt, a duty. I know now what I must do: return to Earth and make my people aware of what has been done here. Of what is being done on other worlds.

I stretch across the gap. Almost. A little more. The tip sways and lurches. The wind claws at me. And on the wind ride phantom sounds and spectral voices. I hear the crash of statues and the screams of Be'nans. I hear Keys laughing. But above it, yet softer somehow, I hear Ta'klu. Try, she says, and I remember my promise.

I edge farther out still until my waist extends past her fingers, and I must grip her body with my feet. On the far tip, Fan gestures me on, pleading with her eyes. I reach again. And touch the far side.

Electrified, energy, power, a force I can't describe thrills down my arm as my fingers brush the other tip. A chorus of a million Be'nans deafens me. Visions of generations of Be'nan lives burn my sight from me. Fragrances of a world of flowers and the stench of a mountain of corpses choke the breath from me. And I fall from heaven.

I slip from Ta'klu's dead, hard, cold hands and from the High Places. I scream as I fall, and the world rushes towards me and I scream again. Then I am silent. For the world has slowed, and I watch my body fall away from me, falling slowly like a feather sinking in amber.

Ta'klu is suddenly beside me, holding Fan by the hand. Other Be'nans hover with us above the High Places, spread across the heavens in an arc, ephemeral hands linked in the web. Ta'klu reaches out to me, and I to her. We touch. And I am Enlightened.

I look down. Somewhere below me, directly under the High Places, my body now lies. That seems both strange and correct.

I sense Ta'klu with me, clear to me even among the seemingly infinite lives of which I am now aware. I hear the question that she asks me: *Now do you know your role?*

My people must learn, I reply. But I've no body.

A human awaits your coming, waits for you to speak through time. When they strike him down, another will accept you. And each time they strike you down, you will rise again, stronger, carrying more of your people with you. You are the prophet.

I remain silent.

Do you accept your place in the web? she asks.

Suddenly we are in the garden again where we first met, and I smell the flowers and hear the fountain. Vines curl around my feet, and through them I sense the infinite web of life that I am now part of. The vision fades, but I know my answer. *I'll try.*

I feel her smile. *That will do, she says.*

I span star systems in a mind-blink to hover above a blue-tinted orb layered in swirls of white. I feel Fan now as part of me, as she always was. I plunge through the white until blue resolves to seas, and brown to endless cities, and I sense the billions that dwell in those cities and under those seas.

I know them all, and soon they will know me. I fly eastwards, towards a coming sunrise, to the one who awaits me.

And I think of resurrection.

Doug's previous appearance in *Interzone* was in issue 126 and he's told stories to over fifty other professional magazines and anthologies.



MARTIN HUGHES



IF... THEN... ELSE

VIDEOSAMES



few of us can have failed to notice the explosion of the computer and video game industry in recent years, such has its growth been. Industry watcher IDATE recently released figures valuing the global industry at more than £16 Billion, which it predicts will rise to over £20 Billion by 2006. Thanks to the advertising and marketing generated by the industry, computer game imagery is everywhere. Even those of you who have little or no interest in video games per se will still recognise the icons of the medium, who amongst us would fail to recognise Lara Croft if shown a picture of her?

With major players such as Sony, Microsoft, Sega, Nintendo and now mobile phone manufacturers such as Nokia involved, the industry has evolved to be almost unrecognisable from its roots. Back in the late 70s and early

80s the computer game industry was predominantly the reserve of the hobbyist programmer, the archetypal pale-faced, spotty teen sitting up all night programming the next big thing. Today's major video game releases bar none are strictly big budget affairs, often costing tens of million dollars. Typically a modern release such as the well received *FarCry* is created by a team of 20 to 30 people, all with a variety of skills. Invariably there are the programmers, but also musicians, artists, sound engineers, animators, 3D modellers, script writers, voice actors and story boarders amongst others. Given the amount of skill needed to create a computer game, it's little wonder that such projects demand huge budgets, and often take years to complete (although that's not to say that the home developer has disappeared completely — which I hope to cover in a future column).

Those of you who have never played computer games may well wonder what all the fuss is about, and if nothing radical had happened to the games themselves in the last twenty years I'd be inclined to agree. In days gone by, computer games were a simplistic affair. You, as a nameless pilot of some kind of 'star fighter', would single-handedly defend humanity from wave upon wave of nameless aliens, in some far-flung, made up, corner of the galaxy. A modern big budget release, however, is a much more interactive form of entertainment. *FarCry*, for example, not only has almost photo-realistic visuals, convincing world physics and superb audio — in keeping with the advances in computer technology — it also manages to combine these with a compelling storyline.

This plot driven approach is, perhaps, one of the most important developments to influence computer games. A gamer now plays an active



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part in an unravelling, dynamic story, his or her actions within the game affect the storyline as it is played through. Some might argue that this has been a feature of computer gaming for a number of years, and whilst in some respects this is true it is only recently that it has come to fruition. The problem in the past has been one of computing power: the sheer amount of number crunching that needs to happen in order to create a virtual environment which looks 'realistic' and acts in a believable fashion, and to populate that world with characters that behave in a human-like fashion, is simply incredible. Fortunately for us Moore's Law, which predicts that computing power will double every eighteen months, has been steadily working away for the better part of the last three decades, and we're now starting to see almost believable worlds being created. So what does any of this have to do with Science Fiction, and in particular Science Fiction

literature? Well apart from the overt, and perhaps obvious, spaceships, laser guns and aliens, are concepts that were first mooted in Science Fiction. My first encounter with intelligent machines, which could respond and react to human input, was in Isaac Asimov's *Robot*. And not twenty years after reading it here I am dealing with a computer game that is intelligently interacting with me, albeit on a rather more rudimentary level. I think it's fair to say that not even the most technically savvy SF author of the 1950s could have predicted the sudden growth of AI and AI that is cheap enough to produce to include in commercial products.

Perhaps more interesting for us though, is the impact that Science Fiction literature can have and is having on this expanding market. Like most forms of entertainment, computer games can be divided into sub-genres: sport, strategy, flight, simulators etc., but the best selling are those which have a Science Fiction or Fantasy theme. This shouldn't come as too much of a surprise if we consider that the most successful film releases of all time have had exactly the same themes. But, whilst computer games have made great inroads into the plot-driven interactive story, it's clear that, to date, there has been nothing to rival the scope and majesty of *Lord of the Rings*.

Developers, however, seem to be slowly realising this. Some of the most popular games of the last year or so have been based on books of one sort or another. Two spring readily to mind: *XIII* and *Splinter Cell*. The first being quite a faithful interpretation of Belgian Jean Van Hamme's comics of the same name, the latter being an offshoot of Tom Clancy's money-making machine. To a developer this clearly makes sense. It's much easier to buy into an already established world and market than to try to establish your own.

This, I think, opens the door to a new market for SF/F short fiction. Sooner or later developers will come looking for ideas and inspiration, and the most obvious place to start looking is the SF/F short fiction market. Only time will tell, of course, but my bet is on sooner, rather than later — and after that, who knows? Perhaps the writers amongst us should start pondering how much to charge video game developers!



LATEST RELEASES

Armagetron

★★★

<http://armagetron.sourceforge.net/> PC, Free

I've wanted to ride one of the light cycles from the film *Tron*. Well now, thanks to Armagetron, you can!

As a single player game, I think it's fair to say that Armagetron isn't up to much. However, played against your friends over the Internet or at a LAN Party, it really comes in to its own as you try to trick up to 16 friends and foes alike into colliding with your light trail, whilst avoiding theirs.

Given that this is an ongoing development project, there are a few minor flaws, but at the bargain basement price of free and as something different to the usual running around shooting at things type of game, this is definitely one to try.

Driver

★

Atari, PS2 (reviewed)/Xbox/GameCube, £29.99

Driver the third in the *Driver* series is an utter disappointment. This is a real shame as it promised to be one of the all-time classics of the genre. *Driver*'s major problems stem from the fact that it is almost totally unplayable. The computer AI is almost completely missing, the controls (especially when on foot) are spotty at best and the difficulty settings seem to be permanently set on frustrating.

All in all, even if you are a fan of the series, give *Driver* a wide berth — it simply isn't worth the cost of a new joystick, which you'll inevitably need after smashing yours to bits.

Splinter Man 2: The Movie

★★★★

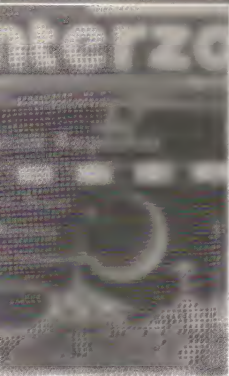
Activision, PS2 (reviewed)/Xbox/GameCube, £29.99

Splinterman is back in this his second outing on the next generation consoles. Closely following the plot of the film, you control the web-head as he jumps, punches, kicks and swings his way to his final confrontation with Doctor Octopus.

Whilst ultimately a progression of the first *Splinterman* game, albeit in different surroundings, the developers have added a number of new features, most notably the ability to ignore the main quest and explore New York at your leisure, preventing crimes along the way.

With decent graphics, sound and fast and frantic action, *Splinterman 2* will keep Spidey fans hooked — but not for very long. Unfortunately the game can be completed in a weekend and so is probably one to rent rather than buy.

Above reviews by Martin Hughes. £2 reviews can also contribute reviews — details next time.



NEW FICTION

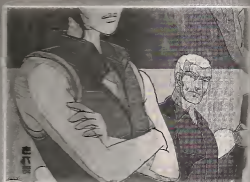
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SONG OF THE EARTH
STEVE MOHN

18
ENLIGHTENMENT
DOUGLAS SMITH

30
SOMEONE ELSE
KAREN D. FISHLER

38
DREAMS OF THE WHITE CITY
JAY LAKE

63
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ANTONY MANN

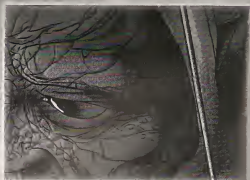


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Karen D. Fishler

(SOMEONE ELSE)

New fiction from the author of
MIKO and **MISERION MEMORY**

The first time Déa saw herself, it was from half a block away. At first she didn't realize what her eyes were following through the crowd. Then she slowed and froze in the middle of the crosswalk just outside the East Village zóom station, the music from her implant storming through her head.

'What are you doing?' asked Tanya, coming back for her from the far curb. 'We're late.' Even Tanya's tattoos seemed impatient, the colors racing around the patterns on her neck as if Tanya's metabolism was driving them extra fast. She grabbed Déa's arm and marched her to the sidewalk. 'Are you loóping again?' she demanded.

'No,' Déa answered. But she wondered. The afterburn from five years of k-drugs was enough to hover around you for a long time, the docs had told her. Like an aura, one of them said, something that's always with you. To Déa, that fit. No matter how many skins she thought she had shed, she knew she was as dirty as ever. And the difference between what was her and what was not wouldn't ever be as obvious as it used to be.

So the figure she had glimpsed on the sidewalk in front of her – the lanky body moving crossways to her through the surrounding people as if it were a boat heading for open waters, the prowlike face seen in profile, the shoulders set like a confident sail, the light brown hair blowing back in a fan as the woman walked – was that real? Or another of the hallucinations that had come up like a banner and sent her careening from the drugs? And the man on the other side of the figure . . . it couldn't be. Déa had sent him away, into exile, back to the land of those who feel and those who live. It had been months since she did that and freed herself from his pleadings. Almost as long since the hallucinations began. Many weeks since she got clean.

'Sorry,' she said to Tanya. 'I thought I saw somebody I knew.'

'From when?' said Tanya.

'I don't know,' she answered.

Tanya raised an eyebrow. 'It wasn't him, was it?'

Déa shook her head, hoping she looked sure. Memmer would have been able to detect her uncertainty, but Tanya was a lifer, and had the blunted sensibilities she needed to get through the week.

'That's good,' said Tanya. Tanya didn't like anybody who might take Déa someplace Tanya herself couldn't go. 'We better leave if we want to save our asses. Unless you want to follow him. Or is it her?'

'No,' said Déa. 'I want to get out of here.'

They turned and went uptown as if it were any other Thursday, and Déa let the music play.

Yasha was waiting for them, something he didn't like to do, and he had a friend with him this time, something he hadn't warned them about. As Déa sat on the rug with the friend in front of the fireplace, his gaze made a spot of fear, cold as fog, appear in her stomach, but she masked it as best she could and tried to appear nonchalant when he spiked himself with an injector.

He watched her observe his eyes change. 'You've been here, I can tell,' he said.

'I'm playing clean for a while,' she explained. 'Doctor's orders.'

He leaned over and pinned her down on the rug with his forearm against her throat, jamming the injector against the skin between her breasts. 'There's enough here to blow you to Mars and back,' he said.

'Leave her alone,' said Yasha from the sofa.

'I thought you were ready to shove them both up for being late,' the friend said.

'That's up to me,' said Yasha.

The friend shrugged and flapped the injector away, then got up and held out his hand to Déa. She took it and let him pull her up and shove her over his shoulder and shove her into Yasha's bedroom, knowing what was coming, knowing she'd have to explain to Memmer later, again, how she just couldn't, on top of staying clean, figure out how to make a living some other way. How she had been ruined for anything else for a long time.

And the truth was that, even as the friend had her pinned again, this time on Yasha's bed, and was slapping her and calling her names and pulling off the rest of her clothes the way an animal pulls flesh off a carcass, she felt a distant sympathy for him. He was just trying to feel something. That's why he didn't use an AC. A doll could be programmed to allow a man to act out his power needs, but it couldn't fill the void at the heart of him. Whereas if she felt something – like pain – it meant he was feeling something.

She remembered that same effort, the effort to feel, and how difficult it was, how ultimately fruitless.

It could be worse, she thought, as she obligingly started to cry. He could really care about me. He could be *him*.

The second time it happened, a few weeks later, she had almost buried the first time, along with pretty much everything that had happened in between. It was a Wednesday. She was alone and had just come from Memmer's, so she already had that scraped feeling that talking to Memmer always produced. She knew that what was scraped away wouldn't come back, but what was exposed hurt.

Not that she wanted Memmer to know that. And keeping the information from him took effort, because, unlike Tanya, he saw everything, and heard things in her voice that she didn't realize were there until he commented on them.

Nobody knew she came to his creaking little office on the lower West Side, with the window that looked out over the haze-covered river and the rug, scrolled in figures of old pink and brown, that dated to the last century and smelled like it. It was her secret world. She liked coming here, although she dreaded it too. The surrounding buildings muffled the roar of the city, the way she had read that islands blocked the wind, making her life seem far away. It – Memmer – calmed her, unlike the robotoc she had tried first. The robotoc had an underlying electronic whacking noise, almost undetectable, that was a constant reminder of what it was. She also didn't like its style. It asked too many questions. When she told Memmer about it, he called it recursive therapy, therapy that spiraled or curled back on itself. He said he liked queuing therapy better.

Talking to Memmer was like talking to two people. One of them asked her questions: What had happened since their last conversation? How did she feel about this and that? What did she think such-and-such an event meant?

The other Memmer listened, invisibly, saying nothing. That Memmer felt much bigger than the one who asked her things. He seemed to hover like a large insect in the room, brown with kindness, weaving something inside of which she could rest, putting her head down and sleeping as she could not remember ever sleeping. When she answered the questions asked by the first Memmer, who sat, alert, in the chair opposite her, she had

the feeling that the second Memmer, the listening Memmer, was hushing the questioner so that her answers could be taken in and put away for safekeeping, in a place where no one else could find or change them.

"Tell me about the drugs," he would say, for the hundredth time. "I told you," she would say. "They were there. A guy gave them to me. All it takes is once, and I knew that, but it seemed..." Here she always trailed off.

"Seemed... what?"

She would think about the answer, looking at the carpet, cov-
ing its flatness and silence and the musty way it didn't have to
respond to questions. And finally she would shrug.

Still, she knew he remembered, the listening Memmer, and
her shrugs and I-don't-know answers were accumulating some-
where and forming some mass that would someday mean some-
thing.

"Why did you stop taking them?" he would ask.

"I told you," she would say again. "They kill you, that's what
the k means, and I decided that wasn't how I wanted to die." And
she would smile at him, knowing he knew the smile was a
challenge. Ask me if that's what I really mean, the smile said.
Ask me about the things I ballroomed, so I can finally ask you
why I saw them.

But though he did ask the first question, she simply said yes,
that was what she really meant. And though she knew he didn't
believe her, they went on to other things. Today, for example,
he had said, "Something happened. What?"

This time she didn't smile. She hesitated.

"Something happened," he repeated. "I can see it in your face.
What are you afraid of?"

"I can't tell you," she said, although she had intended to say
nothing.

"You've told me about the drugs and all the horrible things
customers do to you... what could be worse than that?"

She shook her head. "You wouldn't believe me."

"It doesn't matter whether I believe you," he said.

She laughed, then was silent. He watched her for awhile, and
she had a sense of the insect hovering over her, listening.

"Is this about him? That man? The one you've never talked
about?"

Color swept over her face as if he had hit her. She looked
away. "It's not just that," she said.

"Not just what?"

She took a breath, thinking about the woman she had seen
"Well... regrets. I've got more than most people."

"You want to leave the life," he said.

She was already shaking her head no. "I keep telling you, it's
not something you leave," she said. "It's something you are."

"Is that why you wouldn't go with him?"

"He was... impractical," she said.

He waited for more, and she finally decided to give it to him.

"He told me he loved me and that he couldn't live without me,
but that's not all he meant," she said. "He wanted me not to be
able to live without him, too. The others, they just rent me, I'm
the owner. But somebody like him—it's too much. Somebody
like that... I'd have to give myself away."

"People do that every day with people they care about," said
Memmer. "What's new?"

"They've got enough to give," she answered. "I don't."

Memmer was silent for a moment, and she could imagine

that the traffic noise, way out in the street, was actually wind in
the trees. She had never uttered so many sentences at the same
time. She felt as if both Memmers were listening now, along
with the rug and every thing else in the room. "What if it turned
out you were mistaken about that?" he finally asked.

She stared at him. Sometimes he said things like this. It was
part of his job. Mostly she simply disbelieved him, and they
went on talking, and he knew he would have to wait longer.
She expected the same thing to happen this time, but instead,
she felt tears coming into her eyes, like water into a dry place.
"I have to go," she said, and left, even though there were five
minutes remaining in the session.

And now, walking toward the room station that would take
her home, just as she was raising her hand to thumb her implant
on and distract herself with music, she saw a back that looked
familiar. It was wearing black—something like leather, only
artificial. The woman's head turned as she looked at something
she passed, and Dea heard herself gasp, as if a seizure was
starting. Her body suddenly filled with fear—not the little bit
induced by Yasha's nasty friend, but a dread that flooded over
her and into her like the longing for the drugs, like sex, charging
her with energy. Her feet stopped walking.

As before, the body was moving away from her, half-disguised
by the people around it. Dea couldn't move. What should she
do? She wanted to run back to the office. Memmer kept to the
rules, though. Twice a week, on time, no other sessions, always
in person because that was the real way, the hard way. In the
time it had taken her to walk out of his building and across the
street, the session had ended. Even if he would see her, he would
ask her why she hadn't gone after... who? Herself?

He would also ask her why she hadn't told him about the
other time.

Dea ran, her feet dragging because her knees were so trembly.
She looked and looked, but the woman who was her was gone.

Starting the following Monday, she and Tanya did four bankers
in a single afternoon, then parties of five and eight on sequential
evenings, followed by Yasha and another friend (a girl this time)
on Thursday afternoon. A bridegroom and several of his closest
buddies rounded out the week.

The numbers kept her distracted and sane, but in every group
there was somebody who had that same shade of brown hair
that he'd had, and even while she was working them she could
feel her mind floating away to some safe place where she hoped
he couldn't bother her, thinking *Why is he here?* the way she
always had when his image had followed her into her life.

By midday Saturday, she had had nine hours alone, asleep.
Waking, she lay wrapped in her blue coverlet with the sun baking
her through the wall of temp-control glass that ran along the
side of the apartment, letting the beebes from the week heal,
staring at the screenspace she didn't feel like turning on and too
tired to read.

The phone buzzed, but because the screen was turned off, she
could just lie there, waiting to hear who the message was from.

"Hey," said Tanya's voice. "What the fuck was that about
earlier? You run into me on the street, you fucking say hello.
Plus, stay away from purple, it's evil for your coloring." She
muttered something and hung up.

Dea was crying out for the screen to turn on, screaming for
the phone to activate her voice, but it was too late. Tanya was

gone, and she'd switched off her handphone. Déa couldn't reach her at all.

She went to Memmer's office, but didn't go in. Instead, she began cornering the neighborhood, looking for a woman in purple. She went to every kiosk, every store, within a six-block radius. Then she went through them all again, and store owners began to notice her. She expanded the search another two blocks, but still found nothing. Eventually it was six and she had to go home to prepare for an eight o'clock. This one was on her own; she wouldn't be seeing Tanya again until Monday night. And Tanya still wasn't answering her phone. *I can't even leave her a message,* Déa thought. *What would I say?*

The solo gig was with a man and his wife. They adored each other; each of them wanted to watch Déa with the other. She found it harder than group hangs with just men. The feelings were so unfamiliar, like a language she was trying to imitate without really knowing what anything meant. By the time she got home, she was exhausted. And all night, she kept waking up, gasping, out of dreams in which she was holding herself under water. His voice was always in the background, and she couldn't understand why.

On Monday, she walked into Memmer's office and sat down, then got up again.

"What is it?" he said. "Sit down. Sit," he repeated when she just stood there.

She sat down and stared at him. It was as if she'd never seen him before. His eyebrows were gray and twisty; how had she never noticed that? His knuckles were swollen. She realized he was wearing the same clothes he'd worn the previous week, a red tunic and gray pants. They'd been worn so much the fabric had lost its body, and hung limply. With a feeling as if someone had punched her in the stomach, she realized he would die someday.

"I'm worried about you," he said suddenly. She heard herself laugh, an uncontrollable sound as if she had barked. "I think I'm hallucinating again," she said.

"You hallucinated when you were taking the drugs," he said immediately, with a penny-has-dropped expression.

"Yes."

"And that's why you stopped."

"Yes," she said.

"What were you seeing?" he asked.

She sobbed one breath and stopped herself.

"Him," she said. "I saw him. What did you think?"

Memmer sat with her for a few minutes without answering.

She felt both Memmers come together, as if the kind brown insect had descended into the thin body in the chair opposite her.

"And what are you seeing now?" he said.

"Him," she said. "And —" she could hardly say it — "me. I'm seeing myself."

Again Memmer waited. Then he asked, "Have you ever contacted him?"

As that she rolled her eyes. "What would I say? He's a norm,

I'm not. He's on the inside, I'm out."

"But you're keeping him around."

She stood up. "I'm not keeping him around, he won't leave me alone," she said. "I want him out of my life."

"You're angry because he reminds you of what you think

you can't have and who you think you can't be," said Memmer, looking up at her. "Please sit down."

But she wouldn't. Her face twisted suddenly because it wanted to cry, and she put out a hand as if to ward Memmer off, then walked out of the room. She went to the ladies' room down the hall, imagining all the women who had come here to cry after talking to Memmer, and looked in the mirror and made her face totally still. Then she walked all the way home, block after block after block, not looking at anybody, looking at the sidewalk and the trees and sometimes people's shoes, but never at their faces, ignoring the men whose glances she could feel, ignoring everything.

Tanya had left a message for her saying she was sick, so Déa had to go to the evening appointment with a sub, a dark-skinned blonde who called herself Opaline. The two of them made themselves available in an antechamber off a ballroom for a succession of male partygoers, and a couple of women who thought they were brave enough but weren't in the end. Déa tried to be bored, but the truth was that every face looked the same to her now. She began to feel disoriented.

Finally, in the middle of negotiations with two older men, she told Opaline, "I have to go," and put her pants back on. "I don't feel good."

Opaline had started to express astonishment at how little the men were offering them, even though it was a lot. She paused with her mouth open, the blonde hair around her head halo-like and her hands on either side of her, palms up, the luminescent nails tipping her fingers with fiery green. Déa couldn't stand the look of her. She was out the door, stumbling, running to the zoom station to get away from Opaline and everybody else. Not even the designed lighting and marble of the Upper East Side station could soothe away the sense of something looming, like a wave that would tip her over backward.

She dreamed about the woman again that night, and woke up before dawn, wondering what the woman was thinking and feeling. As she fell asleep again, she was asking herself why the woman wore purple, when Déa didn't.

By ten she'd woken up again, this time out of a dreamless sleep. She dressed and tried to eat something, but couldn't swallow. She left and spent an hour on the zoom, going past the Central Park West station in both directions, back and forth, before she got off.

He'd always been a morning person, so she was surprised not to get an answer when she buzzed his apartment. But, then again, she really wasn't. He was probably watching her from the view-screen inside, just as she would do if he came to her place.

"Forget your code?" said a voice behind her. She turned; a woman was coming up the stoop. Not the woman she was looking for, but someone who seemed to recognize her.

"Sorry about that," Déa said. "Can you let me in?"

"Sure," the woman said.

"Long as you're the right person." Déa laughed with her as the door opened, and followed her in.

The apartment was at the back, on the ground floor. Déa walked along the narrow hallway as the woman — another tenant? — went up the stairs. Finally she heard the sound of a door opening and closing, two flights up.

She paused at his door, listening. There was no sound on the

other side. He was aware of her, watching her displayed in his screenspace right now –

The door opened. The woman in purple was standing there, watching her, except that she wasn't wearing purple. She was in black again. Her face had a look Déa remembered from long ago in her own life. 'Hello,' the woman said.

Déa tried to say something. Her throat closed up.

'I have known that you are coming one day,' the woman said. 'Please enter.'

Her eyes on the woman, Déa took a few steps over the threshold, thinking, *Is that what I sound like?* She had to take another step to make room for the woman to close the door. The apartment was the same. Everything was the same, except for her. She was different. And not. 'What's your name?' she said.

'He wanted me to be Déa, like yourself,' the woman said. 'I wished to be Philippa. That is what he calls me now. Would you appreciate something to drink?'

'No, thanks,' Déa said. Her arms and legs felt numb. She didn't want to faint.

'Please sit down,' said Philippa.

'No,' said Déa. 'No, I can't. I came to see –'

'He is not here. He is gone to buy clothing for me, something he wished me to have. I do not know what. He will surprise me.'

Déa stared at her. She looked happy, happy as Déa herself had never been. 'You don't talk the way I do,' she said.

An expression of regret crossed Philippa's face. 'That has been the very hardest thing,' she said. 'I speak in a formal way. I do not sound relaxed. I try, but ...' she lifted her hands in frustration. 'It is because of the way I learned to speak. As an adult, you understand. Learning with no background, no past. Everything has taken a long time. I have tried to learn quickly, but it is difficult.'

Déa stared. 'No past,' she said. 'You mean you know ...'

'Of course,' Philippa said. 'He has been completely honest with me.'

They looked at each other, and after a few moments Philippa's face turned pink. *She's jealous of me*, Déa thought.

'What did he use?' Déa asked.

'A smear of your secretions,' said Philippa. 'He still keeps the remainder between glass slides, in a box in the bedroom.'

Déa remembered him getting up from the bed, going into the bathroom. She felt her face go hot. 'I didn't know it was possible ...' Possible for her to be so perfect, she meant.

'It is,' Philippa said. 'But it is certainly difficult and expensive.'

'Yes,' said Déa. 'A very expensive way to be able to fuck somebody you can't have.'

Philippa gasped, and they stared at each other.

'Did you know I only had sex with him once?' Déa said. 'Did you know that made him crazy? That he would have done anything to do it again?'

Philippa began to cry. Déa's heart was thudding. She was suddenly dying to spike. She wasn't sure she could get through the morning without it, much less through the rest of her life. 'You're a substitute,' she said.

'No, she's not,' said a voice from behind her.

Déa stopped breathing, and Philippa stopped crying, and in that moment Déa realized that she was jealous of Philippa, too, and that Philippa knew it. Forcing herself to take a breath, she turned around. He had opened the door without either of them hearing it.

He looked the same, only more so. 'She's not a substitute,' he repeated. He closed the door.

'Then why is she here? Why did you violate me and duplicate me, you monster, except to make a substitute?'

And suddenly she had flown at him and, was hitting him and screaming at him, and at everything she had ever hated: herself, the drugs, the life, everything. He didn't fight, he just tried to shield himself. She pounded him, screaming, hating him, hating herself – punching his face, shoving his head into the wall, elbowing his neck, kicking his shins, hitting everything she could reach, shoving him against the wall again, hating him some more. Finally, worn out, she leaned against the back of the door, her chest heaving. The drug wave was gone, but everything it masked was there. She knew Memmer would be pleased.

'You shut,' she said, and hit him again.

'Don't!' Philippa cried out. She was cowering.

'Shut up,' said Déa. She stared at him. He uncurling his arms from around his head and looked steadily back at her. A bruise showed blue next to his eye where Déa had made contact.

'She's you, but she's not you,' he said.

Déa shoved him again. 'Metaphysical shut,' she said. 'You shut.'

'I can't undo it, and I wouldn't want to,' he said.

'I'll bet,' she said. 'You get to have everything I said no to.'

How convenient. She might as well be made of plastic.

'No,' he said. 'That's not right. She's as individual as you are. She's you, but with different influences.'

'Really,' said Déa. 'How's this for an influence?' And, before he could stop her, she turned around and drove her fist into Philippa's face. Philippa thumped to the floor and lay still.

He was kneeling beside her in an instant, cradling her and stroking her face. She was white, but moaned a little as she started coming around. Blood seeped from her nose.

'What do you say I initiate her?' Déa asked him. 'Take her on rounds with me, get her spiking, introduce her to everybody I know. Then she'd be authentic.'

'I don't want her to be authentic,' he said. 'I want her to be who she is.'

'She's me, you shut,' Déa said.

But he didn't hear her. He was stroking Philippa's face again, talking to her, looking into her eyes.

He didn't even notice when Déa opened the door and stumbled out.

On her way back to the zoom station, she reflected that she could tell Memmer everything now. She could tell him that she had lost the man she loved to herself, and that he was gone forever. That she would never walk down the street, anywhere, ever, without the afterburn of this – of wondering whether she would see someone especially familiar. That she would never leave the life now, because she didn't have to – because she had gotten to start over without leaving. And that she hated herself for that privilege, which she would never have. And that she was happy for it too.

There was no music on the way home. Just a huge and majestic silence.

Karen D. Fisher is a Seattle, Washington writer who made her debut in *The Big Alternative* with 'Mika' which she followed up with 'Mission Memory'. Her short fiction has also appeared in *Realms of Fantasy* and website *The Infinite Matrix* (www.infinitematrix.com).

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THE FUNNY PAGES

COMIC BOOKS & GRAPHIC NOVELS



round 15 years ago, a regular column on comicbooks and graphic novels appeared — courtesy of yours truly — in *Interzone's* much-loved but, sadly, short-lived sibling magazine, *Millen*. This column — the one you're now reading — is a continuation of sorts, and the first in what will be an ongoing series.

It's worth pointing out, however, that I won't necessarily be talking solely about SF comics and graphic novels — I aim to cover the whole field: SF, horror, fantasy, superhero and the increasingly popular (thanks to the success of the American *Splendour* and *Ghost World* movies) mainstream work produced by the likes of Harvey Pekar, Daniel Clowes, Adrian Tomine, Seth, the Hernandez Brothers and many others.

Similarly, if you're looking for great cringe-making piddowns in which, waving my thesaurus and dictionary with great dexterity, I mercilessly

lambast the efforts of some poor soul thereby destroying — in the space of fifty or a hundred words — that which he or she has spent long months breathing life into, then you need to look elsewhere. If I feel that something doesn't come up to my own personal measure of quality, then it'll generally be damned by exclusion. I don't propose to waste space on something I'm telling you to avoid when I could use those same words to bring to your attention something I feel you should rush out and buy immediately.

But I used the word 'generally' there and I do so for a very good reason. And that's because I propose to kick off this column by, while not exactly lambasting his efforts, expressing some considerable disappointment in the latest offering from Steve Niles. And I do this because I feel there needs to be a message sent to both writers/artists and publishers alike.

A year or maybe two years ago, Niles

exploded onto the comics scene with *30 Days Of Night*, a relentless vampire tale set in an Alaskan town during its month-long blackout. It was fresh, sassy, invigorating and scary as hell. Full marks. Then, over the months that intervened between then and now, we've seen more Steve Niles stuff. And more. And more again. And it's pretty fair to say that the high quality levels of *30 Days* have not exactly been maintained. It's even prettier fair to say that Niles's new book, *Wake The Dead* (IDW Publishing, \$10.95/£12.99), drawn by Chee, is a very weak affair indeed. A simple take on the old Frankenstein riff, it features characters straight out of *Slain*, a *Swish* Central Casting clunky dialogue and scant regard for either *Consistency* or *Benevolability*. If only people could get it into their heads that Horror is not simply a matter of filling the page with sick-jowed animated cadavers and obnoxious teenagers mangled in a car wreck. The fact is, it's much much more... but alas, none of

Samurai is absolutely breathtaking . . . its dialogue fit to make the likes of Elmore Leonard and Quentin Tarantino weep in unabashed admiration, its artwork stylish and always consummately effective, and its characterisation by turn funny, fearsome and always consistent



it is present here. So be it. The book has been optioned by Dimension Films and it will undoubtedly find the audience it deserves and which, similarly, deserves it.

My point here — and the message I mentioned at the beginning — is that not everything that comes from the pen of a newly-discovered wunderkind is going to be ground-breaking and there needs to be a quality control in place both in the writer and in the publisher. All too often, that quality control is sadly missing and *Wake the Dead* is a classic example.

Conversely, *Samurai* (Vertigo, \$12.95/E£ 9.5) the seventh collection of Brian Azzarello's and Eduardo Risso's Award-winning 100 Bullets title is absolutely breathtaking. Its dialogue fit to make the likes of Elmore Leonard and Quentin Tarantino weep in unabashed admiration, its artwork stylish and always consummately effective, and its characterisation by turn funny,

fearsome and always consistent. Quite an achievement and one which you'd be well advised to add to your shelves — though in all fairness, you really do need to buy the first six volumes. It's a conspiracy-driven noir crime fiction at its absolute best, though Azzarello sums up the series as simply 'Small stories and big mistakes'. As thumbnail descriptions go it's a good one. While you're at it, check out the same creative team's hardboiled take on the Dark Knight, *Batman: Broken City* (DC, \$24.95/E£ 19.99).

Just enough room to mention two more. Seth's *Clyde Fans Book 1* (BFI, \$19.95/E£ 9.99) is the first volume in a duology recounting and re-appraising the lives of the Matchcard brothers as they make their arduous journey through American life over some fifty years. Seth's gentle and cartoony style is perfectly suited to this tale of travelling salesmen, big hopes and equally big disappointments, a slice of the pale and bloated underside of Americana à la John Cheever's short stories (and if that doesn't mean anything, maybe you saw *The Swimmer* with Burt Lancaster? Well, that's a John Cheever story). Updike's Rabbit saga Miller's plays (most notably *Death of a Salesman*) Philip K. Dick's non-SF (particularly the remarkable *In Moon Lumpy Territory*) plus the music of Mark Twain and Howe Gels and the paintings of Edward Hopper. It's



a piece of work that demands repeated readings/viewings, and those repeated readings/viewings will repay your investment many times over.

And finally, I just have to mention the thirteenth edition of McSweeney's Quarterly Concern (Hamish Hamilton, £18.99). This is absolutely a required purchase for anyone with even the most passing of interests in the visual medium of comicbooks or in the actual design of books. The size of a large hardcover novel, McS's QC hits the tape at around 250 pages and features the cream of writers and artists working in the field today — including Seth (with an extract from *Clyde Fans*) Robert Crumb, Dan Clowes, Adrian Tomlin, Joe Matt, Gilbert Hernandez, Debbie Drechter, Chester Brown, Joe Sacco, Charles Burns and Chris Ware. I don't feel it's possible to heap too much praise on this fine volume but don't take my word for it — check it out for yourself.

Happy reading!

SHORT TAKES

This just in: as they say on all the best TV news-shows, according to Variety the rights to Will Eisner's much-loved comic character *The Spirit* (aka Denny Colt, whose adventures are currently being lovingly reprinted in archive editions by DC Comics — what are you waiting for? These are essential purchases!) have been purchased by the financier Odd Lot Entertainment, which is planning a live-action feature adaptation.

There was an earlier plan to bring *The Spirit* to the big screen around twenty or thirty years ago — I believe Harlan Ellison did the script (Harlan, if I'm wrong on this, then my apologies), with James Garner (of TV's *Rockford Files* fame) slated to play Denny Colt but the project never made it off the drawing board. Garner would have been perfect but alas, the intervening years have taken their toll. It'll be interesting to see who they come up with, watch this space — or Nick Lowe's *Mutant Popcorn* — for more info as soon as it's in.

And taking of Will Eisner, on Friday July 21 in San Diego, DC Comics projects and creators (which also includes VERTIGO Wildstorm and America's Best Comics) picked up fourteen of the 2004 Eisner Awards that were announced at this year's Comic-Con International. Winners include: **Best Short Story:** *Death* by Neil Gaiman and P. Craig Russell (from *The Sandman: Endless Nights*); **Best Anthology:** *The Sandman: Endless Nights* by Neil Gaiman and various artists; **Best Publication Design Mythology:** *The DC Comics Art of Alex Ross* by Chip Kidd (Pantheon); **Best Cover Artist:** James Jean (Fables); **Best Graphic Album — Reprint:** *Batman Adventures: Dangerous Dames and Demons* by Paul Dini, Bruce Timm and others; **Best Writer:** Alan Moore (*The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen: Prometheus*, *Tom Strong* etc.); **Best Serialized Story:** *Gotham Central #6-10*; **Half a Life** by Greg Ruckle and Michael Lark; **Best New Series:** *Plastic Man* by Kyle Baker; **Best Continuing Series:** *100 Bullets* by Brian Azzarello and Eduardo Risso.

Talk to Peter Crossley about this column on our interactive forum at www.thefunnypages.com/discuss





DREAMS OF THE WHITE CITY

BRAND NEW FICTION BY JAY LAKE

The Great Machines slept the night the dreams first infected the White City. Towering pale spires loomed in the lavender light of Pellin's second moon, delicate bat-reliefs and geometric inter-cuts trapping pools of numinous purple shadow. The distant Salaminic Mountains punctuated the night sky like a second city wall. Deep in an alley in one of the low quarters, Marga, a servant of the Great Machines, caught her breath, then sighed.

For some years Marga's duty had been to move among the slumbering pools, marking with secret signs dwellings that the Civic Guard would later investigate. Her selections were as random as the investigations that followed – one of the many penalties for poverty in the White City.

Marga looked up to see a curl of cloud warp across the face of the moon. It was joined by a brother cloud, then a whole family, until her chosen alleyway became dark as a churchman's beard.

From the narrow, barred windows above her, from the illicit rooftop huts, from the hammocks along among the

downpours and lightning rods, a groan arose in the mouths of the sleeping poor. It was as if a burred bear with a thousand throats gave vent to a melancholly humus, stretching its pain and sadness over the minutes.

Marga stood stock-still until the moaning faded to silence. Her heart shifted, a key turning in a lock. The years of her nightly work, the shattered families, the losses she had set in motion all tumbled in on her, driven by the power loose under the shadowed moon. Regret pooled in her eyes.

Infused with thoughts of atonement, Marga scurried toward her own back alley home in a distant quarter. When she reached her own door, Marga paused to mark the loyal to her fellow poor for years of nightly betrayal. When Marga lay down in her tiny apartment wrapped in the scents of sage and rosemary, she alone in the city kept without dreams.

In the gold-rod light of morning, a half-squad of the Civic Guard kicked Marga's door in. Their brilliant armor reflected

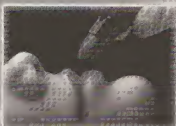
copper smears of sunrise across the muslin-covered walls. Leather boots toppled her corner table, smashing the last of the ceramic cups her mother had left her. Carbon-silver gloves crisscrossed her single kitchen cupboard, spilling the careful sheaves of drying spice, scattering the boarded safe.

Worst of all, when the ransacking was done their great, blind helmets – five discolored reflections of her cowering face and close-gripped blankets – surrounded Marga as she sobbed her pain. They leaned over her, leather-birds picking at a dead rat.

'How did you do it?' one asked, ripping the blankets out of Marga's hands.

She had no idea which spoke. Their armor filtered their voices into mechanical anonymity. Their stance and gestures had long been retrained into neutrality. No scent of anger or areas served to differentiate them.

As always it was with the Civic Guard, at least on the streets.



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The most important thing we can do in this issue is pay tribute to David Pringle, whose 22 years at the helm of Interzone is quite some legacy to live up to. We hope we're off to a good start. Dave Langford's Ansible Link and Nick Lowe's Mutant Popcorn continue, and we hope you enjoy the new columns as much. There are still others to debut, and we plan on alternating some. There isn't a letters column in this issue. We did receive many brief messages of good will, but we suspect that most letters this time went directly to David, which is as it should be. We'll happily continue a letters column should you want one, but maybe those of you with Internet access would prefer to make use of the lively Interactive discussion forum on our website. Looking forward to hearing from you!

"I took my chalk," she said, her chest shaking, "and I made the usual marks. The four of frames, the small sheaf, and so forth." After a few beats of silence, she hugged herself even more tightly, clutching her thin sleeping shift, and added, "Is that what you meant?"

"For whom did you do it?" It might have been another who spoke, Marga could not be certain.

"Like you, I serve the Great Machines." Marga thumbed the bridge of her nose in respect. Her forefinger, crooked over, smeared nervous sweat across her forehead. The familiar gesture restored her to a measure of calm.

"The dreams, woman." Was it a third who lapsed like a frightened adder? "You were inside every bend in the White City last night. What purpose did it serve?"

Marga was too baffled to answer. This was like no Guard raid she knew of. They babbled as men possessed even as they tore her from her bed.

The Guards hagged her, still wearing only her sleeping shift, and carried her through the streets of the White City like so much cartage. The sack reeked of old canvas, mildew, and sweaty fear. Marga couldn't see anything, but there was nothing wrong with her hearing. Morning had its own voices – kava vendors shouting their wares, bakers' bells, braying mules, the screeching of clowns, ratcheting trams, the murmur of a thousand people crowding every block. Even muffled by the sack, Marga could discern the buzzing racket unique to the Carcut Market, and a short while later, the massed rippling snorts of the llamas in Livestock Square.

Marga was certain they were on September Way when her bag was dropped. Her wrist stung with the impact of her body weight. She lay at an odd angle, almost upside down, as the sack was dragged up a short flight of steps, taking each blow to her shoulders. If it was September Way, they were at the Christophe Guard Station. A long way from her apartment, it was the biggest Guard Station outside the Palace Quarter.

The guards dumped her out onto a floor of glazed tile painted with blue birds, cold against the side of her face. Marga lay still, distracted by the competing pains in her wrist and her shoulders. Immediately before her face were a pair of polished leather boots, the beginnings of a man in an officer's dress uniform standing so close that she looked directly up into his nostrils. He smelled of wax and boot polish.

"The White City does not accuse those who are not guilty," the officer said in a tone of bored refinement. "Do you have any confession before charges are prefetred?"

Marga knew she had to answer – to say nothing was an admission of guilt. "I became frightened last night, and felt regret for my work. I put the sign on my own door in atonement."

"There was nothing to regret," said the officer. "You have been one of our best prosecutors. Your doorstep indictments always lead to successful arrests."

Unsurprising, as virtually every human activity was technically prohibited by some section of the White City's Charter, Marga had an Advocate friend who had explained it to her. "The trick in defense is to find a countervailing section of the Charter. That's why ordinary citizens aren't allowed to read the thing – they might get ideas."

Sadly, the only way to secure an Advocate was with a default bond. Marga had no significant funds to her name, and her friend had moved out of contact to another quarter of the White City years ago.

"Very well," the officer finally said. "It's clear you've no further statement. You look as if you have been in a fistfight – I shall charge you with misdemeanor disrespect for authority in your personal appearance under Chapter 11, Section 7, Subsection 4 of our Charter. That should satisfy the Great Court, if they bother to review the arrest records." His tone made it clear how unlikely that event was. "Now get up off that floor."

"Thank you, sir," Marga said as she staggered to her feet. It could have been worse – at least misdemeanor disrespect was not a blood crime.

The captain – as she stood Marga could tell by his collar tabs – gripped her bare arm in one gloved hand. "Now you will talk about dreams."

"I don't dream."

"You dream too much." He dragged her away, the tug of his hand multiplying the shooting pain in her shoulders.

She was not taken to a cell, or an interrogation room. To her surprise, Marga found herself alone in an office, seated in a plush-cushioned chair in front of a gilded desk the size of a wagon. It was barren of papers or equipment, a glossy, vacant expanse that shouted of power.

The room around her only multiplied the impression, dense with artifacts – oil paintings of the White City as seen from high in the air, silver models of the Three Ships, a cat stuffed and mounted on a crystal stand. There had been no cats in the White City in her lifetime. Pillars carved with vines and writhing men supported a high ceiling of lapis-inlaid panels. Shelves lined two walls, covered with leather-bound volumes behind locked glass doors. A fire burned in an enormous marble fireplace. The whole room smelled of wood smoke, furniture polish and extraordinary wealth.

Marga stared at the opulence for a while, fully aware that any single square foot held sufficient value to buy and sell her a dozen times over. She shivered in her shift despite the blaring warmth of the fire.

No one came.

She was without a clock, or even a watch-candle. It was difficult to estimate time, but after perhaps two hours, Marga clenched her courage and slipped out of the chair. She padded across the hand-woven carpet to the door. There was no handle, only a keypad and a handplate.

"Leaving so soon?"

Marga spun, with ragged breath and body tensed to run. The man who now stood behind the desk was the strangest person she had ever seen, even in years of haunting the nighttime alleys of the White City.

"No, I . . ." Words fled her mouth like sand from a sieve.

He was unnaturally tall, perhaps ten spans – at least two more spans than all but the most giant of men. His narrow body was wrapped in a winding bandage, head to toe, except for the oval of his face, which peered out like a withered pear from a folded dish towel. His head was encased in a set of rods and rings that erupted from the bandages, seemingly set to hold everything together. Within the frame, the bandaged top of his skull bulged far beyond the curve dictated by the whimsy of human genetics.

And then there were his eyes. Even from across the room they were glossy black bubbles, as if they were the darkest of grapes, with no iris or white visible.

"Please," he said, waving an arm like the boom of a crane toward her abandoned plush chair, "sit."

Marga trudged back across the priceless carpet, marveling at how warm and natural his voice sounded.

"Captain Hesiod reports that you have nothing to say about last night's events."

She noticed the tall man did not sit. "I don't know, sir. I told him I don't dream."

"But you do." Bandaged hands planned on the glossy desk, he leaned forward. "You must evidently do."

Marga sat, stared at her own hands. They were still dirty with the previous night's chalk and grime. "Who are you, sir?"

"You may call me Epimetheus."

She tried the unfamiliar name. "Epi-me-theus . . ."

"It means *afterthought*. It is my lot to take care of things unanticipated."

"Things like me?" She looked into the black grape eyes. "So you are also a servant of the Great Machines."

"All serve the Great Machines, each in their own way. You, for example, are here as a trusted but errant minor functionary, charged to reveal the secret of your dreams."

"What dreams? How do you know they were mine? I told you, I don't dream."

"Everyone knew it was you. Everyone *was* you, from the meanest lime burner camped on the slag heaps to the highest churchman frolicking among his catamites."

"It could not be me. I am just a lowly servant."

Epimetheus shrugged, a complex array of motions on his lanky frame. "It is you. I could not say why. Perhaps luck, either good or ill. Perhaps some more subtle factor. But you are one of the few who is free to walk the city at all watches of the night. Perhaps it was just the time you were about." He placed bandaged hands on the glossy desk, leaning toward her. "Let me tell you what you dreamed last night, Marga. What we all dreamed. Perhaps the telling will provoke an idea."

"There was a white house on a towering cliff, above Oceanus's wave-pounded shore. The greater moon hung pale on the horizon, while the stars blazed bright in the sky. You walked past doors set with colored glass panes that glowed upon your skin like tiny, squared rainbows. On a balcony over the water, you looked down. A face gathered in the water, the swells smiling into place as if a giant mask had been laid over the sea. The lips opened to the yawning depths of Oceanus, fish tumbling into the gap. With a gust of salt and sea roe, it said, "Coming home" in a voice as powerful as the tide."

"Coming home?" she said. "Who is coming? Where is home?"

"That is what we are here to learn. I will not break it out of you. Were I to do so, whatever power that touches you would find another vessel. Rather, we will learn empirically." Epimetheus glanced away from her, black eyes flickering in the firelight as he stared at the flames. "Your sister and her children have been sequestered by the Civic Guard as a surety for your good behavior."

Marga stared at her bare feet, grubby against the priceless carpet. She was not close to Elena, barely knew her two nephews. Elena considered Marga's work despicable, but there had been nothing else to keep Marga out of the slag heap shames or worse. Still, they were all the family she had. Marga could not betray them. She drew on her experience as a prosecutor, thinking through the signs of indictment and their various meanings. "What charges have been preferred against them?"

Epimetheus stared, his black gaze almost impossible for Marga to hold. "They have not been charged."

"But the Civic Guard cannot hold them for more than three

days." Was Epimetheus trying to tell her something? Was he trying to help her?

"So now you know how much time they have."

"Until I have more dreams," she said. "You want more dreams."

"You see to the heart of the matter. We will dream together."

"Us? You, me and the White City?" My poor sister, Marga thought. She would find a way to pay this man-thing out for that.

"No." Epimetheus laughed, a graveled hiss. "This room is impermeable to a wide variety of radiations. You will sleep and dream here, observed by me, while the populace carries on undisturbed. I have drugs that will keep your dreams close in your mind."

"I still don't dream," Marga whispered as he walked around the desk with a glittering glass syringe.

Mortar crumbled beneath her fingers, abrogating its efforts to hand the whitewashed stones of the wall. As Marga climbed the moonlit spiral stairs, she dragged her right hand along those stones, their texture recounting a history of pressure and heat deep inside the planet. Somewhere close by, the tide grumbled its ceaseless complaints against the fickle shore. Smells of kelp and salt filled her nose, even as she wondered how she knew them.

In her concentration on the stone beneath her fingers, Marga did not realize she had reached the head of the stairs until her left foot missed the rise. She staggered onto a circular balcony, stone coping curving away in a short arc before her. To her right the wall rose to chest height to meet great panes of glass. Even in the bright light of both moons, the glass was dark.

Oceanus stretched before her, flexing long lines of rolling waves to break far below. She was atop a high tower, itself perched upon a cliff, the white-flecked surf beneath her feet seeming much smaller than its true deadly majesty. Further out, a fog bank approached on a swift wind, great pale horses of mist galloping over the swells.

As she watched, the fog gathered into a face, greater in size than the Circuit Market, or even the Spice Plaza. The eyes were closed, their lids heavy as if in sleep. Great, pendulous lips parted, opening to a dark tunnel into the fog bank where lightning played a crooked round of sport.

"Coming home," boomed the face in the fog bank, its breath gusting wet like the harbinger of a thunderstorm. "Coming home soon."

"Who are you," Marga screamed. She leaned over the coping, as if to dive into the waves far below. "Who?"

The fogbank eyes opened, lightning fountaining out of them toward Marga. She ducked behind the coping with a scream, and crouched there crying until Epimetheus's bandaged hand shook her shoulder to waken her.

"It is called a lighthouse," said Epimetheus. He stood next to Marga's plush chair. The fire was much lower than when she had dozed off. "Your glass-topped round tower by the shore."

"That was a dream?" Marga shuddered. "I pity anyone who has to suffer through those."

"Few have them so intense. It was the drug, I fear. When the drug broke your resistance, you changed from insensitivity to hypersensitivity."

Someone pounded on the door. Epimetheus stalked toward it, a grackle insect darting in defense. His fingers danced over the keypad, then the door popped open.



Captain Hesiod stood there, breath heaving. He still wore his uniform coat, though it was loose over his silk blouse. He seemed to have stepped away from an assignation, or perhaps a struggle. "Your Eminence," he gasped, "there are riots in the poor quarters. They fear the Face in the Fog. It was a vision like a thing made real." He glanced at the floor, a man ashamed. "I saw it myself."

Epimetheus's voice changed, anger rumbling from his wrapped depths. "Did the Great Machines see the Face?"

"The Great Machines, Eminence?" Hesiod almost whispered, thumbing the bridge of his nose.

"Find out."

Hesiod came to attention, then turned on one heel and marched away from the door. As Epimetheus closed it, Marga saw how thick the door was, a sandwich of circuits and insulators and stranger things, almost like an electronic mattress. All that insulation, which must be matched within the walls of the room, had done nothing to stop the dream. Her dream.

"Few need to leave the White City," Epimetheus said, still speaking in his large, angry voice. He had turned to face her with his back to the door, but not moving away from it. "Fewer still do so. Ships arrive from beyond the sky, ships vault back through it. The lands around provide for us through automated farms. There is no need to follow our river to the sea, nor climb northward to find its springs. This is as the Great Machines have ordered."

"But someone comes to the White City," said Marga. The know-

ledge of her dream stirred within her, filling her with words and ideas. "This is a place gone wrong, its laws and customs serving the interests of no one. Now someone comes to us, for us. And they are of the White City, for they are coming home to set things right. The Great Machines are afraid." She smiled.

Epimetheus nodded. "Such thoughts," he said with deliberation, "should be shared with utmost discretion. But I would not have been . . . roused . . . if they had not feared."

"Who comes? You know, don't you?"

He shook his head. "I will not say, not yet. If he bespeaks your dreams, so be it. Otherwise I will bide my time."

"We cannot wait," Marga thought of her sister, her nephews. Her best chance to help them was to find her way through this problem of the dreams. "I must go to him, whoever he is, in this lighthouse of his."

"You have the right of it," Epimetheus's expression hovered somewhere between admiration and bemusement. "My experiment in containment has failed. We must first seek a blessing from the Great Machines. Then I can show you your round tower by the shore. We will see what you can learn."

Marga's stomach knotted at the thought of coming to the sea, especially in the place of her dream. She pushed the fear aside, playing for the safety of her sister. "And Elena? What of her and the children?"

"I will ensure their safety until our return," Epimetheus opened the door. "Come, then. And pray that the Great Machines do not summon my bound kin to their service. Metis and Prom-

cheers are much less kind than I."

She followed him toward the seat of the Great Machines like a leaf follows the wind.

They walked in solitude for forty minutes or more, a near-miracle in a place as crowded as the White City. Marga marked three hurrying strides to every one Epimetheus took. She considered and rejected various plans of escape—Epimetheus could surely overtake her in a moment, and she, too, needed to resolve this business of her dreams. Neither would Elena be helped if she ran and failed.

The halls around them varied in style, size and setting, their only constant being isolation. Neither man nor rat crossed their path, even though Marga followed Epimetheus through a sewer tunnel, and later across a narrow bridge high over the crowded Beggar's Row with its ceaseless chorus of plaintive voices and malodorous reeks.

Finally they stopped before a pair of high doors set into a wall of crumbling brick banded by rusted steel beams. Lights glowed fitful yellow high above, individual electric lamps that depended from a further darkness. The tall doors were curved slabs of riveted metal, their finish dull and coated with flecks of white and gray paint. A great metal bar, twisted and scorched, rested on welded hooks. It kept the doors sealed from the outside. Their side. The bar sat about Marga's eye level, perhaps chest height for Epimetheus.

Epimetheus flipped the bar from its hooks. He dropped it to the corroded concrete floor, where the bar rang with the iron-toned shock of immense weight. Epimetheus grabbed both hooks, seven feet apart, and swung the doors wide.

Beyond Marga saw darkness punctuated by tiny lights, red, amber and green. Stale air rushed out, reeking of old iron and shorted circuits. Epimetheus looked down at her, his black grape eyes narrowed to glinting crescents. The metal cage about his head seemed almost to glow. "Are you ready?"

"Where shall I go but here?" In her thoughts, Marga marshaled arguments, pleas against her charges and for the life of Elena and the children.

They walked together into the sinking darkness. Marga started as the great doors slammed behind her like giant hammers. The colored lights winked all around them, accompanied by a faint hum she felt in her breastbone.

A brilliant purple dot appeared on Epimetheus's chest. Two more, an eerie blue, touched his shoulder, then cycled through whole a series of colors. Marga realized she was being painted with light as well, a few drops at a time. She was suddenly ashamed of her filthy, ragged sleeping shift.

Then they were flooded with light. The darkness around remained just as deep, but the two of them were colored with a thousand, perhaps a thousand thousand dots, each shifting color and position. Epimetheus and Marga seemed transformed into burning crystals. Only their eyes were dark, holes in the suits of light.

She heard distant crackles and groans as square blue eyes opened in the darkness. One, then another, then a third while the first blinked out again. Voices snuck into Marga's mind like rats into a bakery, one small step at a time. They were intermixed, many speakers twisted together, strands in a thread.

— you are
— the dreamer
— dreamer

— dream
— this is
— the one
— she is ours
— dreaming

"Marga..." It was a whisper out of the dark, the spoken words overwhelming the voices inside her. "Our servant comes before us."

Beside her, Epimetheus creaked, as if he swayed in the darkness. Marga tried to answer, to show respect, to voice her protests, but the prison of light trapped her tongue and froze her lips. The Great Machines meant her to listen, not speak.

"Time comes," whispered the darkness.

"We are all pursued," it whispered in a different voice.

"Time found you first, ahead in the dark upon our business."

"The business of the city," the second voice responded.

"Our White City," the entire darkness whispered, a plaintive choir of hoarse and faceless voices.

Something wound around Marga's left ankle, but she could not see it through the whirl of colored lights.

"Time," whispered the first voice as it began to fade. "In his wrath." The inner voices returned.

— go to
— Oceanus
— dreamer
— go
— serve us well
— servant
— find the way and close it

The thing in the brilliant darkness crested her thigh and worked its way onto her ragged shift. Marga could not move her hands to brush it off. It was not heavy, but it was active.

"Stop him," echoed a final whisper.

— save us all

A great flash lit the room. Marga got a fleeting impression of towering pillars, metal balconies, rusted iron doors, snaking cables, ladders low and high, consoles, brass-and-copper effigies, dangling chains, a pageant of aging equipment too complex for her eye to integrate into a meaningful whole.

Then it was dark, as if nothing had ever happened. The colored lights were gone. The blue eyes were gone. The climbing thing was gone. The iron-and-short-circuit smell had been overwhelmed by the wet, electric odor of a storm. There was no sound but her own breathing. That was when Marga realized that Epimetheus did not breathe.

"I have had enough of this," she said.

"We may go now."

In the dusty hall outside, as Epimetheus replaced the twisted bar, Marga realized the climbing thing was still with her. Her left hand was encased in a glove of small links, like the finest of armor. She tried to peel it off with her right hand, but she might as well have tried to peel her own skin. She choked back a shriek of terror that rose in her throat.

Epimetheus lumbered away, walking as if he had aged centuries in the presence of the Great Machines. Marga followed, thoughts focused by the clinging terror of the glove.

The Great Machines needed her, which meant she had power.

The power came from her dreams, obviously. She had to find a way to use that power, perhaps an alliance with the sender of her dreams.

They took a boat. Marga hadn't known there were boats in the White City, not anything more than the little paddleboats for rent on the Vancean Ponds. This was a big vessel, perhaps a hundred feet long, with a hull like a knife and a smooth deck with a single rounded deckhouse set near the front. She found comfortable clothing in a room under the deck, then came back up to the deckhouse where Epimetheus observed the boat's passage through a high-arched stone tunnel.

'It's an automated cutter,' said Epimetheus. 'The ship will keep us safe.'

'Is the river dangerous?'

'Sometimes. For some people. River Tethys has been bound, but perhaps imperfectly.'

Marga wondered who the 'some people' were who would sometimes be on the river. As Epimetheus had said, almost no one left the White City. Although she did so now. It felt like an escape. She was free, at least, of the Civic Guard. That thought was followed by a wince of guilt as she remembered Elena and the boys, caught in a net of her dreaming. She would free them.

Marga looked behind the boat – past the stern, Epimetheus had called it – as they emerged into a broad area of water, the sun overhead westerling into afternoon. The White City towered behind them. Its walls glared bright in the sun, great buttresses every hundred yards supporting the soaring vertical surface. The ornate towers of the wealthy flung themselves skyward behind the wall, but not so much as a hut stood outside. The White City was one place, the world outside another. The wall stood guard, keeping each from the other.

Marga turned to face downstream. The Tethys flowed through a south-facing cleft in the Salamase Mountains. As she watched, the cutter slid between rising faces of weathered granite, topped with gnarled pines and lined with pocket-sized meadows. Reptiles clung to the cliffs – creatures perhaps eight to twelve spans in length, as best she could judge from a distance.

'What are they?' she asked, pointing.

'Faux-lizards,' said Epimetheus. 'They're near the top of the native food chain.'

The thought of chains prompted Marga to look at her left hand again. In daylight, the glove mimicked her skin, almost. It sparkled, and was a bit tougher to the touch or her right hand. 'This... they...'

'A gift from the Great Machines.'

The streets were filled with stories about the gifts of the Great Machines, tales of beggar-princes who toiled through the labyrinthine temples of the White City, suborning this churchman, purchasing indulgences from that, until finally they stood before the thrones of the Great Machines and sought their boon. Always there was a flaw in the outcome, no matter how clever the supplicant. Eternal life without eternal youth. Wealth that changed the owner beyond recognition. Might without invulnerability.

'Beware of what you ask for,' Marga said. 'But I didn't ask for this.' She flexed her glove. The thrones of the Great Machines were not the alabaster edifices of story, that was certain. With what had the Great Machines cursed her, other than their dubious favor?

Marga watched the towering cliffs until dark, then went below. She was terrified of sleeping, but she was too tired to do other-

The boiling mists below her had subsumed Oceanus, their tops as storm-tossed as any vengeful sea. The cliffs too were gone, until only Marga stood, hands on the crumbling stone coping, staring out at the raging clouds. The great glass walls behind her were shattered, ragged scraps of birds' nests and old eggshells mixed among their sharp debris. Weeds sprouted around her feet, along the base of the balcony's half-wall, made the formerly glass-walled room in the bowl of what must have been the largest brass lamp in the world.

Marga's bare feet spread on grit and moss, her ragged shawl so thin it might as well be lace, or nothing at all. The angry wind whipped her hair, which had grown impossibly long, like a pennon unfurled from one of the White City's great towers.

There was no face in the clouds this time, but the wind's many voices slid over her ears in a quiet choir. 'Coming home,' they sang. 'Time is almost ready.'

'I will meet you,' she shouted back. 'I will meet you where the river meets the sea.'

'Coming now.'

Marga's gloved left hand rose of its own volition, pointing as it to stab the wind. Lightning leapt from her index finger, forking into the roiling fog. The last of the glass behind her and at her feet shattered into gravel as the lightning stabbed over and over again.

Seen by dawn's tentative light, Tethys had become a dozen braided channels meandering through an endless marsh. Copies of nettle-trees and hummocks of swordswedge blocked sight lines, so everything past the next turning of the open water was a new mystery. The air was filled with birds, little leathery things with great curved beaks and flashing faceted eyes. Insects the size of her forearm dashed along the water on multiple arrays of translucent wings, occasionally falling prey to aquatic cousins of the faux-lizards. But the breeze, such as it was, carried rumor of Oceanus on scents of iodine and salt, rotting fish and damp sands, and the distant call of the surf.

'I almost regret giving you the drug,' said Epimetheus, his first words to her that day. 'Your mind has become perhaps too open.'

'And good morning to you as well,' she answered. 'The Great Machines were in my dream. Their gift, their glove, it took action of its own.'

'I know. I was there.' Somehow, he was gentle even in his reproach. 'So, I am told, was everyone back in the White City. The Civic Guard have implemented a daylight curfew now because of the noising. Your dreams need to end soon or it will not matter what threat they foretell. The dreams have become sufficient danger of their own.'

Marga waved the grass-lined channel through which they sailed. 'You could lose me out here forever. It would be the work of a moment.'

'Would that end the dreams? Or would they just find another outlet, one we could not control.'

He had reminded Marga how thin was the thread that supported her. Not just her, but Elena and the boys. 'I looked up *lighthouse* in the cutter's library,' Marga said to change the subject. 'Why would one be needed here, on this swampy shore where no ships sail?'

Epimetheus unfolded his left arm and pointed slightly east of their southbound course. 'See that dark shadow just visible behind the grasses?'

'Yes. I thought it was distant clouds.'

"It is the Rocks of Binding, a great and terrible eruption of the world's spine that dominates Tethys's mouth. The lighthouse was built in the First Days, when we still received ships from across the sea."

"First Days?"

"Ancient history, Marga."

Epimetheus would say no more. So Marga went back to the library comp below decks to find out for herself.

1042: *First Days* – hist. xref pol., col. – Time period between the landing of the Three Ships and the fall of Chronos as ruler of the White City. This term is normally used only by the social elite as the topic is under Major Proscription. Not understood outside the White City.

1043: *Chronos* – hist. xref pol., biog. – Ruler of the White City during the First Days. Deposed at the end of that period. Detailed information under biographical cross reference.

1044: *Chronos* – biog. xref hist., pol. – Information under Grand Proscription. Great Machine clearance required.

1045: *Control glove processed. Great Machine clearance accepted.*

1046: *Chronos* – biog. xref hist., pol. – (b. Uranus Station II, 2084 Earth reckoning, -76 Pellas reckoning, d. White City 34 Pellas reckoning [DISPUTED xref hist. sub revisionism]) Assumed name of the leader of the Second Pellas Colonial Charter Company, best known as founder of the White City. Birth name is undocumented but –

Epimetheus stretched his hand across the monitor, obscuring the text. "What are you doing?"

Marga slunk down in the station chair. "Reading history." He turned off the monitor. "I should have told you myself." "You wouldn't. That's why I came below."

"Well, come above now. We are almost at the Rocks of Binding. And Marga. . ." Epimetheus frowned, working to form his words. "If the Great Machines notice you using the library comp for this kind of research, not even I can save you."

She followed Epimetheus back up the companionway, puzzling over his words. Had he come to care for her in some way? Or did he simply not want to sustain the inconvenience of losing his link to the source of the dreams?

The cutter docked itself at a stone mole that protruded from the base of one of the Rocks of Binding that towered above the channels of the Tethys. They were a gray jumble of vertical surfaces and rounded tops stretching taller than Marga could guess. Surf broke a few hundred yards out to sea on a hidden bar or reef, the resultant reduced swells slapping hard against the mole and the abrupt shore behind it, colliding with the brackish outflow from the marsh-bound river.

Epimetheus loomed by the gangway, silent.

"I will go up first," said Marga.

The cage around his head glinted in the sunlight. His expression gave no hint to his thoughts, set like a walnut carving.

Marga crossed the gangway, walked down the mole, then began to climb the winding path cut into the cliff face. She looked back at Epimetheus. He still stood on the cutter, surrounded by wheeling gulls. He hadn't moved.

Surprised at her disappointment in going forward alone, Marga trudged up the path. It switched back and forth, climbed secret clefts and occasionally tunneled through wide-thrown buttresses of rock. Marga very quickly lost sight of Epimetheus and the cutter. She concentrated on the rough path. The skyward side overhung and often spilled onto the path. The falling side was rounded and riddled with splens and cracks and stretches of rotten footing. Every curl of shade hosted slippery moss to catch at her feet. The path rose at a severe angle, straining calves until they burned. She never found a spot wide enough or sufficiently protected from the wind to stop and rest, so she kept going.

At one turn, a cluster of moss slid under Marga's right foot. She slipped, losing her footing and staggering to waver over the edge, arms stretching for balance.

"Epimetheus!" Marga shrieked as she tumbled. She grabbed at a protruding rock, no bigger than a loaf of bread. She caught and held herself, feet dangling over a drop of a hundred yards or more to a narrow ravine with a silver-braided stream sluicing out of the shadows towards Oceanus far below.

"Help me," Marga whispered to the rocks. The lichen had no answer. Her arms shivered with the stress, her calves cramped. How easy it would be to let go, to tumble into the little stream below, to join her bones with the myriad soul that sheltered a few shade-loving plants in the deep cleft. "I'm sorry, Elena," she said.

"Coming," whispered the voice of water, fog and air. It was in her head, in the rocks around her. "I am coming."

"Chronos?" Marga whimpered.

"Time is coming. . ." Then the voice was no more than the light chuckling of the stream below.

Marga scrambled with her feet, trying to find purchase. Her left foot snagged in a crack she could not see. Using the last of her strength, she heaved herself onto the path, curling her body against the rock prow around which it had made its treacherous bend. She lay on the shadowed, damp stone and sobbed.

He was a little man, not much bigger than herself, with ropy muscles and a sunburned face. He was dressed in a white silk blouse, and a dark leather vest embroidered with beads of a thousand colors. His hair was the shade of old copper, a hue Marga had never seen in life outside of her own mirror, and his eyes, like hers, were the color of the inside of the lime she had once tasted. Stained teeth showed between his weathered lips almost continuously, as he somehow smiled while he talked. Marga had the impression he rarely stopped smiling or talking.

"So we had this idea that if we let the art-intels manage the demand curve variation we could dampen out the swings in the business cycle. Themis and her clique weren't willing to give up on monetary exchange, even though I'd been pushing for time-multiples – she said I was just talking money by another name, but I said, hey, no interest, no penalties, and my system was a hell of a lot cleaner than barter." He paused for a moment, cocked his head like a robber bird. "Am I boring you?"

"Of course not." She laughed. His courtesy was somehow transparent and sincere at the same time, a liar telling the truth despite himself. "Where are we?"

Chronos waved a careless hand over his shoulder at the tall, narrow windows behind him. A gorgeous blue sky pushed at the glass. They sat at a polished table in neat white chairs, surrounded by a restrained elegance of style and functionality. The keeper's residence at the Binding Rocks Lighthouse. Very high up.



Marga marvelled at him. 'The White City is over three hundred years old, yet here you are.'

Chronos winked. 'Coffee?'

'Is that like kava?' She pursed her lips – the White City's ubiquitous street drink was notoriously bitter, and had never sat well on her tongue. Marga's body signalled exhaustion, pain, the despondent penalties of chill and damp, but her mind told her she was in this warm, cheery place. Suddenly she craved the warm drink.

'No, no.' He hopped up from his chair, moving just like he talked – in short, sharp movements. 'The real stuff. From Earth.'

'Like you.' She knew very little about Earth.

He grinned, stained teeth on display like a row of weathered poring slabs. 'Like me. Or at least, close enough.'

She watched him race around the room, working with a small machine, laying out two cups, finding supplies in various cupboards and inside a cooler box, babbling all the while about command economies and capital migration. 'Why me?' she said to his moving back, to his flying copper hair. 'Why now?'

He stopped, looked back at her, his lime-eyes darkening. 'It is time, finally,' he said. 'And you are one of the few left who could hear me. Don't ask those questions, not right now. Now is my gift to you.'

Marga wondered if he meant the coffee or the conversation, but she never got to taste it. The glove on her left hand rubbing at her face distracted her back to wakefulness.

She staggered onto an open meadow. The lack of a cliff face took Marga by surprise, jolting her out of a mindless world of ever-rising strides. The sun was almost down, she was soaking wet and could not control her shivering.

On the other side of the meadow, there was a low building next to a slightly taller one. The tall one had a shruny cupola with antennae atop it.

The lighthouse. She had reached the top of the Binding Rocks. Marga wondered where Epimetheus was. Surely if he had followed her, he would have overtaken her while she slept on the path. She hoped he had not fallen to his death.

She staggered toward the buildings. Neither one looked like any of her dreams. They seemed to be ordinary institutional architecture, like a pumping station or a transit center back in the White City.

The grasses of the meadow tugged at her ankles. Marga looked down. The grasses really were tugging at her. She had never heard of such a thing. They curled and strained to catch her. She could see their nipples in the meadow in front of her. The glove pulled her on toward the lighthouse, picking up speed, forcing her to run, to jump over the ripples in the grass.

Marga made it to the lower building, the glove slamming into the door hard enough to pain her hand again. The door banged open, and she lurched in. She glanced over her shoulder to see the grass coil in twisting spirals, telegraphing its despair.

The interior was filthy, covered with debris and dirt. The furniture appeared to have been shattered years ago. The narrow windows from her last dream were visible on the south wall, but smaller than Chronos had made them seem. She even recognized the kitchen. The whole place stank of piss and old flesh.

The glove tried to circle the room, pulling Marga after it, until she grabbed her left elbow with her right hand. 'You stop it,' she whispered to her left wrist. 'I want to find him too, but if you crack my head against a wall, we aren't going anywhere.

Behave, and we'll see how much we need to argue when the time comes.'

The glove relaxed, pressure fading. Marga massaged her hand through it, then picked her way across the room to the open door.

Chronos lay facing her on bed of springs anchored to a metal frame. He was smaller than she had dreamed him, his body wasted and curled by time, a dead insect discovered in a forgotten corner – he showed all his ancient years. His head was encased in a cage like Epimetheus's. Nude, his freckled skin hung loose on his emaciated body, and the floor beneath the frame was piled with rotting excreta. His lime-colored eyes were gone, replaced with black pits like Epimetheus's, except Chronos's eyes were the dull black of beetle's wings.

'I am coming,' he whispered from the bed.

She knelt by his side, knees sliding on the old shit. Her right hand reached within his head frame to stroke his brow. 'They couldn't kill you, could they? You created them.'

'The Great Machines,' he said. 'They are my children. Epimetheus and his siblings betrayed me to the rebellion. The Great Machines slew their aunts and uncles here at the Rocks – Oceanus, Tethys, Themis and the others, binding their power and blood to Pallas to hold me in my banishment. Stripped of my powers, they thought to outlive me without taking my life themselves. They were afraid to do all that was needed, back then.'

Marga's left hand crept onto the bed, the glove reaching toward Chronos. She moved to grab her own wrist, got her right hand tangled in his head frame.

He hissed his pain, then said. 'The ring controls all, embedded codes and hardware overrides inside it. I swallowed it, when Pallas joined them.'

Pallas? The world? Marga thought he was delirious. 'What?'

'Back then, when I was overthrown, the Great Machines found a way to talk to Pallas – to the whole world. They bargained for a sealed border, gave away my plans for a mess of portage and the politics of paranoia. Children!' He hacked, a dry cough. 'We dreamed of being so much more than what we have become.'

Her left hand caressed his neck. Her right hand was trapped in the frame. Marga beld back her left with main strength while working to extract her right.

'Find my ring, say the word, and the White City will be yours,' he whispered. 'Send those damned machines back to the basement and set our people free.'

'Why me? Why now?'

He smiled, a ghost of the glorious man she had seen in her dreams. 'Pallas came to me with its regrets just lately. You are the last of my descendants with any of the old power in your blood. There was no more time, no more of me. Not even I can live forever.'

Her gloved left hand leapt forward, clawing at Chronos's chest. She yanked her right hand free of his head cage, eyes tearing in sympathy to Chronos's reflexive grunt of pain. Marga grabbed her left wrist, fighting the glove as it stroked at the old man's neck.

'What word?' she asked, desperate for more time to understand this oldest man who claimed to be her ancestor.

'Saturnalia,' he said just as her left hand crushed his voice box.

Crying, Marga smashed the glove into the kitchen wall until the wall shattered. Then she smashed it into the floor until her

fingers were limp and bleeding and her wrist was bent at an odd angle. The glove finally gave up, dropping off. She grabbed it in her right hand, ran outside, and threw it off the cliff, into the long drop toward Oceanus.

Then she dropped to the ground among the writhing grasses and screamed her pain and grief. The grasses caressed her like a lover, or perhaps a mother, until her sobs died away. They bound her hand, weaving themselves into a net that supported her broken wrist and smashed fingers. She watched this, then watched them retreat, revealing all the while except for a flat, smooth path back to Chronos's door.

'I get the message,' she said. 'Pellias, is it? Having second thoughts about the Great Machines. Well, so am I.'

The grasses continued to writhe as Marga went to mourn her dead.

In the morning, she found a broken-tipped knife in the kitchen, and sat by the metal bed trying to find the nerve to cut open Chronos's gut. He had said that he swallowed the ring, when the Great Machines had taken over. That had to be over two and half centuries ago. How could he have kept it inside that long?

Marga shrugged. Anyone who could stay alive for more than three hundred years could surely manage to keep track of a ring. But where was it now?

The broken tip of the blade pressed into the cold, paper skin of his stretched, hollow gut before Marga realized she should search his feces, piled below the bed. He had known she was coming. He had time to do something. He'd reached out across the miles, and maybe even the years, to her. He must have had help from Pellias, from the power of the world.

She could not think of the planet as a person.

The broken tip wiggled back and forth through the piled scat, raising smells that made her gag, tears in her eyes. Laying under his cold body, fouling her right arm as she kept the injured left clean behind her, Marga winnowed through the stuff. He had to have planned this. This wasn't centuries of shut, after all.

The knife struck something solid. She felt down the blade and pulled it free.

It was a ring, of a dull gray metal she did not recognize. Three inset black jewels, no larger than grains of salt, decorated the bulge along one curve. No shut clung to it, so she looked inside the arc. It was engraved, *Chronos: 2 Pellias CC*.

Clumsy with the grass brace and the pain, she used the thumb and forefinger of her clean left hand to rub the shut from her right ring finger. Then she slipped the ring on that hand.

No lightning struck. Chronos did not rise from his deathbed. Voices of the planet did not whisper in her mind.

She kissed his forehead, the frame pressing on her cheeks, then rose to depart, leaving the knife behind. Marga took one last look at Chronos as she walked out. In death, he eyes were still slitted open. She could see his green irises against the curling gray whites of his eyes.

Marga walked across the meadow toward the path. She did not look back until she reached the drop-off. The keeper's cottage and the lighthouse were now overgrown with vines trailing in and out of the windows, covered with dark, glossy leaves. They looked as if they had stood so for centuries.

'Pellias?'

The grasses waved in a great circle.

Her sister Elena firmly in mind, Marga turned to take the

downward path. The sea wind, Oceanus's breath, met her in and beckoned her onward.

Epimetheus stood on the deck of the cutter beside the gangway, exactly where she had left him the day before. She walked onto the mole, stopping when he raised his left hand.

'Come no closer,' Epimetheus said.

Marga rubbed the ring with her right thumb. She had no idea what, if any, power it held. She was not prepared to tangle with Epimetheus in any regard. She spread her arms wide, hands open, to show she held no weapon.

'Is he coming?' Epimetheus asked.

She bowed her head. 'Chronos is dead.'

'So it is done. He was my uncle, that you were sent to kill.'

Marga looked up to see Epimetheus flexing the fingers of his left hand. She realized he wore a glove. Her glove, that she had cast into the sea? Marga raised her right hand in a fist, pointing the ring at Epimetheus.

'Did it come back to you?' she called.

'Climbed over the rail this morning. I could not tell if it panted success or failure.' His fingers flexed, closing together. Just like in her dream, a bolt of lightning flashed toward her. There was the noise of ripping cloth, and a great humming stench. Marga was surprised to find herself still standing. The ring on her finger glowed slightly, even in the morning light, and her hand shook. Her body felt weak, stunned, as if she had been struck herself and barely survived.

Words slipped out of Marga's mouth, Chronos strong in her mind. 'Epimetheus, time has come to lay old wrongs aside and renew what you came to build in the White City. We can make the city what it was meant to be.'

'The Great Machines have their pact with Pellias,' Epimetheus said. 'The days of building are gone.' His left hand flexed again, then threw a swift fog that curled around Marga, setting like gelatin. She waved the ring in front of her face, cutting through the curled fog as if it were a spider's web, and walked through it down the mole. Though the fog did not resist her passage, it sapped her strength.

There was nowhere else to go but the cutter. There was no one else to turn to but Epimetheus. She had defeated the glove when it wore her. He could do so, too. Marga needed him, to free Elena and the boys, to help her survive. To liberate the White City. He knew so much more than she.

Epimetheus was still, fingers flexing, but no wrath erupted from the glove as she approached the gangway.

Marga could barely stand, she was so weak and ill from the lightning and the fog, but she raised her head and looked up him. 'Their pact with Pellias is void now. I am free of them. I am free of the glove, Epimetheus.'

'Your ring, it was his.'

'Yes. Now it is mine. Take off the glove. Join me.'

His arm shook, as if he struggled to lower it. The glove fought him, pointing its fingers at Marga. She rubbed the ring with her thumb again. She didn't think she could sustain another strike. She had to act, not against him but against the glove that was controlling him.

'Oceanus,' Marga whispered, 'Pellias, if you hear me, help me now. Saturnalia, in Chronos's name.'

The cutter sank in front of her, the angle of the gangway tipping toward level. Epimetheus's eyes flexed wide, surprise overtaking whatever violence had been in the making. Marga watched as a tower of water lifted behind the cutter, a narrow wave that

stood in place. Its face foamed with spume, water racing down ward as if the upwelling were in the middle.

Epimetheus moved his lips, silently mouthing one word over and over again.

She realized he was saying, 'Help.'

'Save him for me,' she shouted, throwing her arms wide. The stored lightning arced from her ring as the towering water collapsed onto the cutter. Flame sheeted harmlessly into the sea foam from Epimetheus's gloved hand as the wave collapsed over him, breaking in two to swirl around Marga as if she stood in side a glass bell.

She found Epimetheus's body on the narrow rocky shelf that served as beach next to the shoreward base of the mole. Behind her the cutter snail floated, although at an alarming list. Water jetted from the hull as it pumped itself out, while dents in the hull stretched and popped in the strain of self repair.

Epimetheus had lost the glove. His bandages had loosened at the flood, and the frame crowning his head was knocked askew. Marga worked the bandages on his head further off, exposing scarred pink flesh marked with circuits and wires. On close examination, the frame had tiny catches and knobs, perhaps intended for adjustment. She loosened it, eventually lifting the pieces away. The bulge of his skull beneath the bandages was something mechanical with dozens of sharp probes reaching down into his skull. Heedless of the bleeding of his skin, she pulled it off and cast it into the sea.

Eventually, he was naked in her arms. Terribly tall, terribly scarred, but human, except for the black eyes.

I need you to help me free Hera,' Marga said. She pulled the ring with her thumb, then caressed Epimetheus's face. 'Breathe, and live.'

He lay motionless in her arms.

'Breathe,' she said, 'by Oceanus and Chronos, in the name of the city you meant to build.'

He did not move.

Marga unbound some of the stems from the brace of grass on her left arm. She chewed the stems to a pulp, then slipped that pulp between his lips. She crossed his lips and eyes with the ring.

'Narannalia,' she said. 'And breathe in Pellay's name that we will make right all things.'

The black lids fell away from his eyes as he blinked, showing irises the color of the inside of a lime. He tried to talk, but only belched up salt water. Then he smiled.

'I lost my sister,' she said, 'then the Great Machines.'

'It will not be easy,' he said. 'My siblings have been roused to meet us on our return.'

As he leaned hard on her shoulder, Marga led Epimetheus to the cutter. On their way back up Iethys, Marga prepared her next dream: as the water whispered its secrets to her and the leather birds called her name.

Jay Lake is a 2004 nominee for both a Hugo and Campbell award, and his stories appear in a wide variety of markets including a new collection, *American Snows*, featuring his Hugo-nominated novelette, *Into the Gardens of Sweet Night*. Jay also co-edits the *Polyphony* anthology series. He can be reached through his website at: www.jaylake.com.

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DAVID LANGFORD



ANSIBLE LINK

NEWS



In March I unwisely gloated in a Link instalment that never appeared that Ansible had reached its 200th issue. Beat that, Principer! Farewell Mr P, and thanks for all the fish, helio Mr C, and TTA.

AS OTHERS SEE US Our wonderful British press is warming up for next year's Worldcon, with Alison Rowat of *The Herald* reckoning she can confidently predict that come next August, when the 63rd (sic) World Science-Fiction Convention opens its doors in Glasgow, there will not be an enorak, a roll of tin foil or an anal probe to be had this side of the Calnegorms. Deeper analysis follows. According to excited tourism officials, the planet's biggest sci-fi bash will bring 6000 visitors and 44m to the city. What the mad fools fail to appreciate is the risk involved in rolling out the red carpet to people who are... to a man —

and they are all men — wired directly to Mars. And so on, and on, with one highly subtle touch of guilt by association — what's the betting bin Laden has a well-worn DVD of *Plan Nine From Outer Space* in his cave or a natty pair of mail order Vulcan ears?

TERRY PRATCHETT assures the world that any alarming reports of his hospital visit are MUCH EXAGGERATED. What I had was an angioplasty where they widen arteries in the heart by going up through your leg (believe me). No real cutting, no weeks in bed, it's an out-next-day job.

CHRISTOPHER PRIEST was disconcerted by *Angry* magazine (May/June 2004), whose story *Cruelly the Human Heart* by O'Neil De Noux opens. In my first fifty years of life, I've only hated one person. Truly hated. Christopher Priest, white male, born November 22, 1963.

That's right, he was born the day John F. Kennedy was killed. No, the president's soul wasn't recycled into Chris Priest, no fuckin' way. The story continues to build up the unpleasantness of this character — who tortures cats, and worse — until he eventually meets rough justice at the narrator's hands. Although the given birthday doesn't fit, our very own Chris Priest asked *De Noux* whether this choice of character name was sheer coincidence. He received an apologetic assurance that it was.

MYTHOPOEIC AWARDS for 2003 fantasy and criticism: Adult Literature: Robin McKinley; *Sorcerer's Children's*; Clare B. Dunkle; *The Hollow Kingdom*; Scholarship (Inkings): John Girth; Tolkien and the Great War: Scholarship (Other): John Lawrence & Robert Jewett; *The Myth of the American Superhero*.

SANDY AUDEN REVIEWS MARTIN SKETCHLEY'S DEBUT NOVEL AND INTERVIEWS THE AUTHOR



Simon & Schuster hpb. 306pp. £10.99

Martin Sketchley's *The Affinity Trap* displays several qualities that place it one step ahead of many other debut novels. Often newcomers use the 'say what you see' principle: they tell you what happens. Sketchley shows you his story from inside the personality of his main character Delgado, utilising all the physical senses and a good deal of emotional input too.

Delgado is a disgruntled ex-hero in a regime that no longer wants him. *Affinity Trap* opens when he is summoned by Commander Supreme Myson, who sends him on a mission to retrieve a female alien, Lycern. She is destined to become Myson's wife — a marriage that will stop the imminent war between Earth and Lycern's home planet Serilett. Delgado embarks for *The Affinity Group*, a spiritual order where Lycern is hiding. Extracting Lycern turns out to be the easy part of his journey because by then he is addicted to her muscled pheromone, a powerful sexual stimulant excreted by special glands along her shoulders. Fleeing the *Affinity Group*, Delgado hides with Lycern on a tourist station to decide whether to return her to Myson or abandon his past and risk staying with her. Either option could turn out to have fatal consequences.

Right from the start, Delgado's depth comes across. Many experienced military commanders turn out to be emotionally flat, killing machines, but Delgado's warmth and humour shines through. For example, when his mission to the *Affinity Group* goes awry and he crash lands on the planet, he makes a mental note to purchase 'a crash helmet and apply for piloting refresher course' when he gets back.

Delgado's transformation sits at the heart of

this story and we follow his inner revelations — as he begins to realise his mistakes, discard his previous values and discover new passions to lead him forward. Sketchley handles most of it well, though at one crucial decision (which I won't disclose) Delgado's motivations should have been highly turbulent but Sketchley brushes it all aside with an inadequate single-line explanation.

Particularly impressive, though, is Sketchley's ability to make sex between Lycern and Delgado feel alien. Many novels fail to convey that these aliens are exactly that. Aliens should think differently, have different priorities in life, different motivations, but all too often they come across as human personalities with plastic alien masks. Of course, making them too alien would render them confusing but Sketchley has captured just enough of the elusive otherness in Lycern to work effectively.

The prose, on the whole, is smooth and firm, producing an easy undercurrent to pull you forward, although Sketchley does have a habit of stepping off the plot line occasionally to set the scene. One minute you're sweeping along, the next you're paused to take in the ambience, then it's back to the story. While the descriptive content of these moments is graphic, it's still a slightly disturbing experience.

The whopping great plot twists are disturbing too — with more of a thrilling effect this time. There's plenty of intrigue to entice you deeper into the story and the ending is both unexpected and an obvious opening for a sequel. Sketchley has delivered a novel with a strong sense of humanity, an engaging style and the unmistakable sub-vocal hum of future potential.

PAUL KINCAID ON NOVELTIES AND SOUVENIRS, A COLLECTION OF STORIES BY JOHN CROWLEY

John Crowley has a good claim to be the most critically respected author currently working in the fantastic. Certainly his books are as near perfect as it is possible to be, and for twenty years or more critics have been falling over themselves to say so. But it would seem that beautiful prose, hauntingly elegant stories and critical respectability do not translate into sales. At least, that is how we must interpret his treatment by publishers in America: the fourth and final part of his extravagantly praised *Aegypt* sequence has been turned down by leading publishers and will appear, if at all, from a small press. (At least America has seen these wonderful novels. In Britain only

Aegypt has been published; it was shortlisted for the Arthur C. Clarke Award, but that wasn't enough to persuade anyone to publish his two sequels, *Love and Sleep* and *Dremonomania*, nor indeed his most recent novel, the exquisite *The Translator* and presumably no one will be taking up this new collection of short stories either.)

Now, with *Novelties and Souvenirs*, his publishers appear to be trying a different tack. The cover shows a subtly intriguing photograph of a zeppelin flying over a 1930s city street (it bears no relation to any of the stories, but the mood seems appropriate). There is a note to the effect that Crowley has won awards and *The Translator* was

a *New York Times* Notable Book. There are enthusiastic quotes from Harold Bloom, the *New York Times* Book Review, the *San Francisco Chronicle* (which compares him to Thomas Mann and Robertson Davies) and he is described as 'A master literary stylist'. And nowhere in this book until you get to the publishing history of these stories tucked away discretely right at the back are the words, science fiction or fantasy used. They have finally given up trying to sell him to a curiously indifferent genre marketplace and are instead trying to place him in the mainstream. One can only hope it works, because Crowley deserves a massive audience and if we are not



SA: Delgado is a deep character: did you use much of your own experiences in building his layers?

MS: I don't know. I know there's a sentence in there about him being insular and isolated as a child and never really requiring the company of others. That was me, all right. You'd probably have to ask my wife how much of me she's seen in Delgado. Hang on: I'll ask her. She said: "You share the same determination to see things through." So there you have it — most of it anyway. I cut out her bit about being bitter and twisted. Maybe you should ask my mum — on second thoughts.

SA: Why did you decide to include these aspects of your own personality?

MS: To make it convincing. I distinctly remember realising you had to do this quite early on. And also not worry about who might read it. At the time I was reading excellent short stories by people such as Joel Lane, Christopher Kenworthy and Nicholas Royle, and trying to write that kind of material myself. Chris Kenworthy's short story collection *Will You Hold Me?* is intensely personal so much so that I had to write to tell him how uncomfortable I felt reading it. It was as if I was some kind of voyeur on his life. Joel Lane's been a big influence on me, too, although you wouldn't associate his urban grime with space opera. Joel once had a wonderful short story published in *Panurge* called 'Every Form of Refuge'. I went through it underlining bits. Sometimes I had to underline whole paragraphs. He told me when I met him recently that the only part of this story that was made up was the last paragraph: it was through reading such work that I realised you don't really have to make things up, you just put them against a different backdrop or give them a different spin.

SA: So you keep it personal, but you also make it rather alien in some cases too...

MS: Lycern's 'alienness' really highlights what Delgado's about. But writing convincing aliens has always been a problem for SF writers. I occasionally find the aliens in my work raising eyebrows in surprise, shaking their head, etc. and you just can't do that. I liken it to dogs and cats: dogs move part of their body when they're happy, cats make a strange noise. There's even the dilemma of whether you're going to refer to he/him, she/her, and I felt slightly uncomfortable with that sometimes, particularly considering the Serlotts are a three-sex race.

Serlotian conque are effectively females, child-bearing, voluptuous, moost are males, brutish, aggressive, sperm-carrying, vulme are somewhere in between, androgynous in appearance, calm, aloof. I refer to individual vulme as either female or male depending on their physical characteristics, but conque and moost are always females and males respectively. Readers have to be able to understand what's going on, and you need to be able to use your aliens to get across whatever it is you're trying to get across.

SA: You've written many short stories in the past: how did they help you with writing *The Affinity Trap*?

MS: Economy of word usage: for one thing novels and short stories are very different, but I think learning to be able to express yourself within five words instead of twenty is always a benefit. Although sometimes it's better to say things in a few more words for the sake of clarity. Most of the short stories I've written are unpublished (and unpublishable!) but when I looked back through some of them recently I realised that many of the ideas in *The Affinity Trap* are explored in some way in those stories albeit with different names and/or contexts.

I know one other SF author who actually writes a short story when planning a new novel and expands on that. I know other writers who work without plans. I don't think either of those work for me, though. I've realised that I need something more concrete. Producing a piece of writing is like going on a journey and I don't go on too many journeys without knowing the destination. If you know the destination you can plan your route to see the sites, stop for refreshment and hopefully avoid getting downwind of the sewage works. You might still get caught up in traffic though. Or break down completely.



making him a viable publishing option: what hope is there for the genre?

That said, a collection of stories is not necessarily the best place to start reading if you are new to Crowley. He is neither a prolific nor always a proficient short story writer. The publishers have misleadingly subtitled this book *Collected Short Fiction*, though it omits *The Grilloid of Shakespeare's Heroines*, which was published in *Conjunctions* 39 a full year before this volume appeared, nevertheless, the fifteen stories gathered here are all else he has produced in over 25 years. It is not that hard to see why. The shortest pieces — 'The Green Child', 'Lost and Abandoned', 'The War Between the Objects and the Subjects' — are generally the weakest. A story that doesn't have room to develop subtle atmosphere and illusion doesn't

allow Crowley to display his strengths.

When he does allow himself this space, however, it is obvious why he has won such renown. 'Great Work of Time' is not much shorter than a novel, and in its slow unfolding you will find one of the finest tales of time travel, alternate history and paradox you are likely to encounter even though it is not always clear that that is what you are reading. Other long stories collected here — 'Snow', a haunting meditation on memory and loss; 'Novelty', a story that combines the religious impulse with the idea of being a writer so intricately that at times you feel in here must be the original seed of *Aegypt* and its successors; or 'An Earthly Mother Sits and Sings' — a chilling blending of the ballet of the Silk with the destruction of the Spanish Armada — may not quite have the mesmerising quality of 'Great Work of Time', but

that is only because a plot worked out with the intricacy of a watch mechanism and told obliquely through the emotions of its witnesses is something even a writer as skilled as Crowley cannot achieve every time. Make no mistake: there are treasures here that any other author would kill to achieve.

Of course anyone already converted to the cause of John Crowley will already have all but four of these stories in the collections *Novelty and Antiquities*, which means this is a collection aimed particularly at those of you who have yet to discover his work. Go and buy it now. You owe it to yourself to read perhaps our finest writer, and you owe it to the genre to convince the publishers that he is worth keeping in print.

[Perennial \$13.95]



RICK KLEFFEL ON TONY BALLANTYNE'S DEBUT NOVEL, CHINA MIEVILLE'S LATEST...

Recursion begins in 2210, when Herb, a spoiled rich kid, returns to the planet he seeded with self-replicating robots (VNM's or Von Neumann Machines, after John Von Neumann the early 20th-century scientist who first proposed them). He's not happy to find a veritable sea of swimming insect-like machines slowly consuming the entire planet. Worse, he's been caught by the Environment Authority and agent Robert Johnston is clearly not going to cut him any slack. The next storyline finds Eva Ilye in the year 2091. Stuck in a dead-end job at a burger joint, she makes a drastic decision to escape the ever-present nanny state that ensures everyone is healthy. If not happy. Finally, in the year 2119, Constantine Storey arrives at Stonebreak, an early VNM-built city where he's to meet with a mysterious group that is on the brink of a momentous decision. *Recursion* relates the three characters' end plot threads with economy, grace and a sense of humor.

Readers can expect to find in *Recursion* some finely-tuned paranoia about on-going and ever-increasing surveillance, and our willingness to surrender our right to privacy. In Ballantyne's layered narrative little is what it seems to be.



For UK: pb, 345pp, £12.99

Perception, identity, reality and hallucination are also key concepts here, in the finest tradition of Stanislaw Lem and Philip K. Dick. For all the familiar and innovative ideas banging about in this book, it's the writing that ties it all together and makes *Recursion* so enjoyable. Ballantyne's prose is admirably stripped down and presented with an enjoyable smug. His characters are quirky and just flawed enough so that readers will welcome them back every time a new set of scenes is up.

For a first novel, *Recursion* is quite remarkable though not entirely problem-free. But by the time Ballantyne is forced to resort to an info-dump — which is exactly how he labels it — the novel has enough momentum to chug right past.

The reader cannot help but be caught up in unraveling the mystery which connects our world to Ballantyne's and the separate storylines to one another. *Recursion* lives up to its title in a number of fashions, but in one way that overshadows the rest. Upon finishing the novel, the reader will be tempted to go back and read it again.

Politics and fantasy fiction are by no means strange bedfellows. There will be no confusing the politics behind China Mieville's *Iron Council*. Mieville's work is as topical as any work of non-fiction, but by filtering our reality through his fertile imagination and refocusing the result into the carefully detailed world of Bas Lag, Mieville has created a political tale with considerable staying power. *Iron Council* is a baroque complex novel that digs out universal human truths and is as entertaining as the locomotive that runs through the entire novel.

Appropriately, *Iron Council* sets off on two tracks. One set of characters, Cutter, Osse, Pernieray and Dragon, have escaped from Mieville's complex metropolis of New Crobuzon in search of the fabled Iron Council. As they strike out across the frontier wastelands that surround New Crobuzon, readers will realize that what's unfolding here is nothing less than a fabulously imagined Western, with gunslingers, monsters and flea-bit frontier towns.

Another track stays smack-dab in the middle of the big city. Mieville's New Crobuzon, Orli Clutez works his way to the heart of a rebellion against an increasingly onerous aristocracy that is slowly draining the city of resources, money and youth to fight a war for unclear reasons against a foe that may never be defeated. Orli is an earnest young rebel who digs deep and reaps the rewards of his pursuit. Rebellion is always possible — but is it desirable? Do motivations matter?

Iron Council is a pleasure to read on so many levels. It's almost hard to keep track of how enjoyable it all is. As a simple fantasy adventure, it has no equal. Mieville's imagination runs riot, but he seems truly connected to a real world out there. As a timeless political fable, it makes arguments and counter-arguments with clarity and depth of vision. As a contemporary political satire, it sings its barbs with dire accuracy and wild, passionate outrage. But it's first and foremost a gripping fantasy adventure, chock full of memorable monsters and compelling characters.

Make no mistake about it: Mieville's *Iron Council* is an important, powerful novel. The Dickensian feel of New Crobuzon ensures that it is a place that readers can return to in their minds to visit again and again. The enthralling narrative unfolds with clarity but rewards re-reading. If you're just living in a fantasy world — and who doesn't want to — then you'd be hard pressed to find a more rewarding habitat than *Iron Council*.

[Pan Macmillan hb, 469pp, £17.99]
+ China Mieville



...AND THREE NOVELS THAT REVEL IN THE JOY OF TERRIFYING THEIR READERS

Now that science fiction means space ships and cyberspace, it's easy to forget that the genre had its origins in horror. *Frankenstein*, generally considered the first science-fiction novel, was primarily conceived as a vehicle to terrorize the reader with its take on technology run rampant. Mary Shelley's first vision that inspired the novel was of the rotting face of the monster hovering over her bed. Death and technology are still pretty scary stuff, and science-fiction writers seem to have rediscovered the joys of terrorizing their readers. But though the themes and scenarios are remarkably similar, the execution and the effect of *Dead Lines*, most recent novel by seasoned SF writer Greg Bear, and both *Ring* and its sequel *Spiral* by Japanese horror veteran Koji Suzuki, are quite different. In *Dead Lines*, Bear offers a more quietly personal horrific vision, while in *Ring* and *Spiral*, Suzuki pulls out all the stops to create one conceptual horror after another.

Greg Bear is an old hand in the world of science-fiction horror, and he's written some of the landmark titles. *Dead Lines* is a very effective return to this format. Jumping on the quantum-bandwidth bandwagon, Bear's Maguffin, a super cell phone called Trans, operates by using the "interconnectedness" of elementary particles. Bear waves briefly at Bell's theorem, but for a science-fiction writer, he wisely keeps the science in the background. *Dead Lines* is a mood novel of dread, despair and depression.

Peter Russell doesn't just know the emptiness he lives in. Since the murder of Daniela, one of his own daughters, he's been divorced and aimless. Now, the death of his best friend Phil leaves him even hollower. He barely gets by running errands for Joseph Benoit, an old Hollywood producer who lives in hiding on his Malibu estate. He and Michelle, his young wife, are Peter's last lifelines to this world. It's at their estate that he meets Stanley Weinstein, the head salesman for a new type of cell phone called Trans. But Trans is much more than a cell phone. Weinstein says: He's unfortunately unaware of just how much more.

Dead Lines is written in plain but efficient prose and very short chapters, meant to keep the pages turning, and it works. It's sharp and to the point. The same trend holds for Bear's cast of characters. Bear keeps his sights on Peter, and the reader will be thankful. Peter isn't just a sad sack; he's as bitter as a burnt cup of coffee. Of course, Bear gives you the techno-geek behind Trans, and his ever-more-nervous sales force. There are no cackling mad scientists here. You've probably worked with people like those who mean the harm at Trans.

The shadows that Trans brings out do solidify enough to provide more than a few genuine scares



HarperCollins hb. 400pp. £17.99



based to die. One way only. One way to find it.

HarperCollins hb. 288pp. £10

Vertical Inc. 288pp. \$24.95

and a nice sense of overwhelming dread. Bear brings out the New Age healer, the buried bodies and even suggests that there's an ecology of the afterlife. We're not at the top of that food pyramid. Bear shows us the shadows cast by the pervasiveness of technology that nobody really understands but he doesn't infuse the novel with needless details. He waves his hands and leaves

trails of darkness. In a hubristic fit of geek pride, Trans installs their nexus in the execution chamber of a now-defunct prison. It's a wonderful touch that complements the theme of the novel nicely. Bear's enouement is just grand enough to suggest awe but stops well before it gets overblown. He doesn't let his science-fictional premise overcome the shadows.

Though Koji Suzuki is known as "The Stephen King of Japan," he takes a very science-fictional approach to his material in *Ring* and the even more so in the sequel *Spiral* (published 2005 in the UK). Even if readers have seen one of the many adaptations, the novels have quite a bit to offer. They differ markedly in both tone and plot. Don't expect to encounter gorgeous reporters in Suzuki's novels.

In *Ring* (translated from the Japanese by Robert G. Rohrer & Glynne Walley), the protagonist is a cranky overworked young father Asakawa, who is so distracted by his busy life and a past failure that still haunts him that even his niece's death barely registers. But a chain of chance leads him to discover that another teenager died a similar death at precisely the same time. Only when his reporter instincts are enlivened does he begin to investigate. Once Asakawa realizes that he's under a tight and very real deadline, he employs the help of his old acquaintance Ryuj, Ryuj's a philosophy professor and his cynical, scorched-earth point of view are all that stands between Asakawa and an unpleasant death. Together they try to find the "charm" that will save Asakawa.

Suzuki approaches the deadly incident not as a horror novelist, unearthing a supernatural curse, but as a mystery or science-fiction novelist, connecting clues logically to eliminate the impossible. No matter how improbable, the deadly conclusions Asakawa's forced to come to are all that remains. The first and foremost suspicion is that some sort of virus killed the teenagers. That proves to be correct, but it's not a virus like any other readers have encountered.

It's interesting that the solution to the riddle is called a "charm" here, because the novel itself has not a hint of any supernatural feeling. This is a cut-and-dried clue-clatching mystery with subtlety to spare that's a joy to read even if you think you know what's going to happen. More often than not, you won't know, and even if you do Suzuki's clever plotting and unsympathetic characterizations will keep you glued to the pages. It's a compelling thought-provoking page-turning reading experience. This is not to say that *Ring* is without problems. As one would expect, occasionally the prose can get on the clunky side as the wheels of translation catch on cultural idioms. But by and large the translators, Robert G. Rohrer and Glynne Walley, have done a great job. >>>

Wesley have done an excellent job. They create a unique sense of unease that's utterly unlike what you'll find in any horror written in English.

Suzuki himself trends towards the expository. Now that's not surprising, given that the novel operates a bit like a Cohen-Doyle mystery, with Riyu playing the part of Holmes to Asakawa's Watson. But Suzuki is plowing a path that nobody else has traveled: as his Ring virus is born into an all-too-vulnerable world.

Spiral (translated by Glynn Walfay) takes up shortly after the end of *Ring* and audacious doesn't get you halfway past page one. As you start the book, glance upward. The small black square in the sky above is the bottom of an Acme email. Don't even bother to step aside. The physics of the reading universe suggest you'll not be able to avoid it. Suzuki isn't just selling scares in *Spiral*. He's swinging a baseball bat to your genre-fiction sensibilities on multiple levels. When you expect horror, you get mystery. When you expect mystery, you get science fiction. By the time you think you're reading science fiction, you'll be able to read the lettering on the bottom of the email: 40 TONS.

Like Peter Russell in *Dead Lines*, Ando, the protagonist of *Spiral* starts the novel as a man in mourning, a coroner who tries to lose himself in his work so that he does not have to think about the accidental drowning death of his son, and his subsequent divorce. He's even thankful when presented with the body of a colleague, Ryuchi, whom readers will recall as the glaring scholar

who missed the seven-day deadline in *Ring*. He finds himself attracted to Ryuchi's lover, Mai, who found the body. But even on the slab, Ryuchi apparently has something to say. As Ando sews up the man having stuffed him with newspaper by chance, a small square of newspaper slides out as the final seal is stitched. On it are six numbers in two rows: 178 and 136.

From that instant, Suzuki begins an upward climb that takes Ando and the novel from ciphers and word puzzles into one unexpected consequence after another. While *Ring* merely suggested the viral nature of the video-taped curse, *Spiral* takes mind-bogglingly confident strides from a puzzle-oriented mystery to a medical thriller and then spirals easily into the realm of science fiction. Make no mistake, Suzuki delivers one shock after another, and many of them will leave the reader ringing with horror. Even though the main character is a coroner, the shocks are not corporeal but conceptual. *Spiral* will make you think thoughts you would not ever have considered could enter your brain.

In order to manage this, Suzuki keeps his prose bone-dry and his presentation straightforward at times too straightforward. He brings the narrative to a dead halt with a brief explanation of how DNA works, which is admittedly motivated by charts and diagrams, not the usual stuff of horror thrillers. He recaps most of the plot of *Ring*. The former will have some readers turning the pages faster than they can possibly read, while the latter will be more welcome than it has any right to be. But Suzuki's

crystal-clear conclusion is without peer when it comes to maintaining credibility in the face of plot escalations that hit precisely the right note of awe-inspiring intellectual astonishment. Like a cattle exorciser in a slaughterhouse, Suzuki knows just where and how to apply his stunning revelations.

Suzuki's characters are the subjects and objects of those revelations; manage to retain more autonomy than one might expect. Ando's grief is nicely established at the outset, with enough pertinent detail to display the depth of character required to sustain Suzuki's more outrageous innovations. Miyashita, his collaborator as he pursues the mystery of Ryuchi's death, offers a more balanced and human perspective on matters. One of the interesting aspects of reading a novel that in some senses conforms to the description of "suburban horror" is that the Japanese setting and culture come to life in subtle ways, in observations that might be overlooked in an another novel.

By the time readers have finished the novel they're so thoroughly gobsmacked by what Suzuki brings to pass they won't be able to focus on anything in the real world. Suzuki is nothing if not bold.

Spiral is the vector for a series of nasty concepts that wheedle their way into the reader's mindset with the help of his antiseptic prose and razor-blade reasoning. Suzuki cuts to the quick. His devil's-advocate logic is contagious. By the time you realize you're convinced, it's too late to look up. The last words you need aren't in the novel: 40 TONS.



MUGWUMP SCHISM: BOB KEERY REVIEWS MOVE UNDER GROUND BY NICK MAMATAS

Writing, drinking and meditating his way back to sanity through the aftershocks of another nervous breakdown, Jack Kerouac receives a scroll at his Big Sur hilltop cabin: a cut-up Necronomicon smelling of blood. It's from Neal Cassidy, living emblems of the Beat universe, and warns of bad times to come. Following a visit from the bodhisattva Kileya, Ti Jen goes back on the road to track Cassidy down before the worst happens. When he sees the sunken city of R'lyeh rear up into the Pacific night, he realizes he is far too late.

As the trip develops, Kerouac and Cassidy meet dharma burns famous and obscure, regularly travelling through sewers to avoid the shoggoths and madness soon everywhere above. Only hipsters, beats and well-matched families are immune to the Old Ones' call, but not the slavish appetites of the demarcated insect horde. The almost-traditional Lovecraftian apocalypse is cleverly reimagined as a violent Beat picaresque—something by using a style and form nearly fifty years old Marmatas makes the Cthulhu Mythos not just new, but consciously

contemporary in a way which many more frantic and overwrought letter-day tellers of tales squamous should note. Perhaps the key lies in the explicit, if not entirely innovative linkage made between the Dark Gods and the Tangles nightmare of Bill S. Burroughs, who becomes the third mind in Kerouac and Cassidy's troubled and homoerotic partnership. Armed with bullets and bug-spray, the decadent and born-odd Burroughs is shown to be their purest heart: a committed magic warrior who long ago had no choice but to face the darkness that Kerouac had always been in flight from.

Marmatas has plenty of fun speaking in Kerouac's voice and moving through his world as it cracks beneath the cold hard glare of Cthulhu's eye. Subject wins out over style as Kerouac's long, meandering sentences and digressions are bitten into shorter, choppy chunks to match the tight, relentless pace of the pulp paperback shudder-novel. This emergent, experimental offspring of styles takes wild shape and forms a unique new outlook capable of challenging both American

writings' elder gods and its hippest horses. Kerouac's prejudiced and unreliable narration serves as a critique of the Beat generation and does its history a favour: offering a fantastic but subtle explanation of the process that could have turned the desolate, angelic figure of Sal Paradise (Kerouac's prime fictive alter ego) into a living broken and embittered relation of his own beat ideals. *Move Under Ground's* most chilling section is the epilogue, detailing nothing more sinister or otherworldly than two days in Jack's life circa 1960, just a year before his death. Absent while the movement he had begun enjoyed its tricky apothecosis and the despised fags fellow subterraneans Burroughs and Allen Ginsberg are being teared and shot-at in the name of peace. Jack is a caged and destructive child. Even here Marmatas is too smart to be judgemental: the alien memories of what has been sacrificed so Jack's imperfect dream can survive is too strong. Its karmic toll on his country's soul too deep.



IAN EMSLEY ON MORTAL LOVE BY ELIZABETH HAND AND RIVER OF GODS BY IAN McDONALD

Richard Dadd reputedly painted his masterpiece, *The Fairy Feller's Master Stroke*, with a magnifying glass as he created the layers. The outcome is beguiling yet alienating, fantastic yet familiar, reading Elizabeth Hand's new novel, *Mortal Love* is a similar experience. It is a novel with two narratives — one historical and the other a modern fabulist tale — which is intricately detailed and bewildering close up but forms an impressive whole.

In one sense it is an hallucinatory experience which begins in a moribund London. Algernon Swinburne is taken in to the depths of the city to view a strange night. A few years later, Redburn Cornstock finds his muse which leads to a family legacy of pleasure, creation and madness which will finish up in the wilds of Cornwall. Increasingly the tone becomes Gothic in true sense of the mode with a delightfully purple style (and language), travelling through the underbelly of the city to the crumbling sanatorium on the coast of Cornwall as it becomes increasingly dark in atmosphere. Around a century later, Daniel Rowlands comes to London to continue researching his book on the mythology of Tristan and Isolde. He is introduced to Larkin Meade who offers to help with his research, taking him into places with previously unheard of archives in counterpoint to his partner, this tale is a colourful hallucination, preserving a London painted by Burne-Jones which is as likely to leave its protagonists in a thinned forest on a canal boat as not exist at all.

It is this thinking, and the secret history that provides the reasons for it, which unites the tales. In both tales, men circle methinks around a central female figure, a Muse in a true sense of the word. Each man drives himself into madness creating his own fiction around Larkin and Evienne. Blinded by a passion that turns into obsession, they become insane whilst chasing their own dreams, oblivious to the cost in their obsessions. Daniel's book and Redburn's drawings, artists are the entities who enable the thinking of the real world, allowing it to mix with fantasy. Yet they fail to understand what they are chasing, seeing the creation as the prize not the recognition of what they are painting or researching. Jude Larkin's therapist, tells Daniel that Larkin has been using artists to leave himself for mortals through her appearances, that she is a progenitor of the mythic cycle that he is tracing for this reason, but Hand cannot allow her to remain solely in this world and brings the two ends of the tale together in a tableau that is all the more vivid within its broken setting.

Hand's use of magic realism is reminiscent of Shepard or Alice Hoffman and *Mortal Love* is a novel that deserves recognition in wider circles. It is a beautifully crafted book which repays rereading, at once ancient and modern, lyrical and chilling. As

with mythic cycles the conclusion is consolatory, currently an unfashionable concept, yet one leaves *Mortal Love* with the sense that this was the only way it could end. Each character has their own ending and beginning from that conclusion. The ripples have begun to spread.

(William Morrow, £24.95)

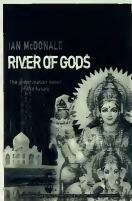
At the start of *River of Gods*, Ian McDonald describes a sacrificial offering in the River Ganges, the one permanent entity in this novel. As the book ends, we are still paying tribute to the stately course of the Ganges, for without it we would not have such a strong image that represents India in the Western imagination. McDonald cheerfully places his own offerings of characters and narratives, each building and commenting upon the others. India is on the eve of the centenary of Independence, when ten different lives begin to swirl and conjoin.

Mr Nandha is a hunter of rogue AIs. His tools combine the latest in modern technology with a user interface that comes from the Hindu pantheon. His latest task will bring him into contact with an AI developed by AIs but raised as a human girl unaware of what she is. Aj believes that she is searching for her parents when she meets Dr Lull, a scientist who has adopted the Goan lifestyle but knew her parents, and Lise Dumeau, one of his ex-students. Due to the restrictions imposed upon the development of AIs by the human authorities, Lull and Dumeau try to conceal Aj from the authorities but find themselves involved in a greater secession.

Vishram is called back from Glasgow to deal with a family crisis in India at their firm, Ray Power. Contrary to his brother who is all for taking a bid from a Western rival, he argues that Ray Power was developed as an Indian firm and should remain so. He finds that there is a project to draw power from the multiverse and astounds the world by bringing the project to fruition.

Meanwhile Naja, a neophyte reporter, interviews an AI that is a soap star (but also the soap), which makes its moves as a politician. The two characters develop narrative lines to draw the television and electoral audience in and suspend their natural disbelief in the drama that is being played out. Having met the AI as soap star, she is manipulated into running a story to discredit another politician without checking the facts or sources that she is presented, wreaking damage instead of revealing a scandal, and injecting yet more tension into an already volatile public opinion.


As tensions grow, from the hate crimes visited towards the Nute, Tai, to the move towards full military mobilisation, the AIs manipulate the



Simon & Schuster, £17.99 hb/£10.99 pb

various powers in an attempt to discover what it is truly like to be human. As they gain their insights into their 'masters', they realise that the only place that they can be free is within the alternate universe developed by Ray Power. They send back an Unidentified Object to retell Lull and Dumeau of their helping Aj, and of the human part in the AI independence. At once they take the narratives of the ruling classes and subvert them, mixing native mythology with foreign technology to derive a new interface as well as rewriting the political and entertainment narratives to articulate their own dreams and desires.

River of Gods, however, is a whole that is more than the sum of its parts. McDonald captures the voices and atmosphere of the sub-continent, mixing the intricacies and nuances with the rulers and the subjugated. Not only does McDonald mix castes and peoples but he also mixes language, concepts and philosophies. He is also adept at using various SF motifs and coupons and then underplaying them.

It is also an SF novel which acts as a continuance of the motion towards a Fantasy of Now (or should we now read this as genre of now?). With its commentary on media, technology and human interaction, this is a novel which draws from incidence and uses games to alienate the present by bringing it into closer and clearer perspective. As the various eddies come together in a final confrontation, it is chastening that the book closes with the Ganges still flowing its natural state, having been involved in the transformation of those around it yet not being consumed by it. 



he first issue of *Interzone* appeared in Spring 1982 and contained stories by Angela Carter, Keith Roberts, M. John

Harrison, John Sladek and Michael Moorcock. The magazine was edited and produced by a cast of eight people listed alphabetically. The last named was David Pringle, who also wrote the first editorial.

Twenty-two years later one name remains. David Pringle, sole editor for many years now, has brought out his last *Interzone* — number 193. He has now decided to return to his roots in Scotland and hand over the editorship and management of *Interzone* to Andy Cox of TTA.

David Pringle was born in Selkirk in the same house as another famous editor, Andrew Lang. As a child he read everything from Enid Blyton to Edgar Rice Burroughs, but it was watching *Flash Gordon* on TV that inspired him, at the age of eight, to write his first science fiction story. He also remembers building a wooden space ship in the back garden of his house.

"I was kind of serious-minded. I suppose like most people who become fans. I really enjoyed science fiction as a kid for all the sense of wonder and gosh-wow — dinosaurs and galaxies and big bangs and spaceships, all the usual thrills and spills that are summed up in a film like *Star Wars* or more likely for me, *Flash Gordon*, which I saw on television at a tender age, or books of the Captain W.E. Johns type — not his doggie books but his space books — or comics, *Superman*, *Batman* and the rest. But what happened in my teens was that this got converted into a serious commitment, mainly because of Michael Moorcock's *New Worlds*, which I discovered at the age of fifteen. Reading the editorials and the reviews in that made me interested in the possibilities of science fiction as a literary form to comment on the modern world, to explore what was different, what was happening compared with the past and the near future. So I suppose by the time I was out of my teens my commitment was to a kind of science fiction best summarised, to my mind, by the work of J.G. Ballard, which seemed to be both science fiction and a serious literature about the present day and near future. It wasn't just Ballard. I was keen on writers like Brian Aldiss and Thomas M. Disch and many of the writers associated with *New Worlds* — plus Kurt Vonnegut, Philip K. Dick and various others I discovered along the way. I'd read the usual gamut of what might be called the more literary end of SF.

He generally came third at his primary school. The top two were always girls, of course. Although always interested in science, his best school subject was English (the further away from maths, the better), and he went on to read it at Sussex University. Shortly after graduating



he wrote an article on J.G. Ballard for the science fiction critical review, *Foundation*.

Already, the idea of being an editor appealed to him, but it seemed an unlikely career prospect, so he went on to qualify as a librarian at Leeds Polytechnic. Soon after he became reviews editor of *Foundation* and in 1975 gained a two-year research fellowship at the Science Fiction Foundation, then housed at North East London Poly.

I asked about the beginnings of *Interzone*.

Interzone was first thought of in 1981. I suppose it had been a kind of teenage dream of mine to produce an SF magazine. I was about thirty when we started it but the point was I had grown up as a teenager reading *New Worlds*. It was the greatest British SF magazine and it lasted until 1970, so I'd read it between the ages of fifteen and twenty. I suppose I wanted to recreate the experience, or make it possible for others to have

David Pringle was the editor and publisher of this magazine for 22 years, retiring with *IZ:193*, and we pay tribute to his achievement with this interview. Elizabeth Counihan asked the questions

a similar experience. By 1981/82 there hadn't been a proper SF magazine in Britain since the demise of *New Worlds*. There had been a few attempts, the most famous being *SF Monthly* but it didn't last very long and it was a completely different kind of beast, a large poster size magazine with a lot of illustrations.

When we started *Interzone* in 1981 it was an attempt not to recreate *New Worlds*, but to do something equivalent, something slanted heavily towards fiction — a British science fiction magazine with a bit of a literary bent.

Was there any particular type of SF he was interested in or wanted to promote at the time as *New Worlds* had promoted 'new wave'?

Yes. The New Wave, which *New Worlds* had been identified with in the parties, had run its course by the early eighties. The whole of the 1970s had seen the ebbing of the New Wave. It was a period in which British science fiction had rather run out of steam. The New Wave had had some good effects, but it had also had some bad effects. It had made science fiction less self-confident about tackling some of its own best themes such as far-future stories and space travel and time travel, all the things that were so confidently handled by writers of the fifties and early sixties. These had become unfashionable partly because of the New Wave, and one of the things we felt by the early eighties, when we started *Interzone*, was not only that we would like to continue something like *New Worlds*, but at the same time we would like to, in effect, wind the clock back a bit, and encourage British SF writers to be free again to use the whole repertoire of science fiction. We wanted to kick-start the British genre into both doing new things and perhaps rediscovering old things, well.

Did he feel a bit of sense of wonder was missing at that time?

Yes, there was very little about then in the late seventies, early eighties that showed what

you might call a traditional sense of wonder. I suppose a typical author of the time was Christopher Priest. I don't mean to dump on him but what he was producing was approaching more and more to mainstream fiction, with only a tweek here and there of the strange and the science fictional. In 1975 he actually announced that he was leaving science fiction. There was quite a lot of that kind of thing around. Writers as talented as Chris Priest and M. John Harrison were producing fiction of that type, but there was very little fiction of the more expansive and more frankly imaginative kind.

The point was, we weren't averse to what these writers were doing but we wanted to encourage other writers — newer, younger people — to come along and among the things we were quite happy for them to do were traditional SF things reappearing the whole gamut of what SF had been about for the last fifty years.

This brought our discussion to the extraordinary collective who started the magazine.

There was a bunch of us, really two simultaneous bunches who heard about each other and got together. Some people in London were planning a new science fiction magazine and I was one of another group in Leeds, although I left Leeds shortly after. So there was Simon Oursley, Alan Doray and myself and a couple of others at the Leeds end. In London there was Malcolm Edwards, John Clute, Roz Kaveney and Colin Greenland. So we decided to join forces, rather than both go ahead in competition with each other, and that's how the magazine ended up with eight co-editors when it finally appeared in the spring of 1982.

Was there any difference between the Leeds lot and the rather literary-sounding London lot?

Well, I think we all had what you might call a science fiction fan background. We'd all written for or edited, fanzines. Alan Doray, for example was the editor of *Vector*, the BSFA magazine, and that was when I was the editor at Foundation. Malcolm Edwards was working in a fairly junior capacity in those days, for the book publisher Gollancz, and I think John Clute was involved mainly because he was invited by Malcolm — to add weight, if you like.

The name, *Interzone*, was actually my suggestion. We collectively decided we liked it best of the various ideas that went forward. The name is of course stolen from William Burroughs who coined that imaginary city for his book *The Naked Lunch* in fact years later, after we had launched the magazine. William Burroughs published a book called simply *Interzone* — a collection of his sketches and outlines.

So at the time they started *Interzone* there really wasn't another British science fiction magazine at all?

Well, as it happens there was another one that started up slightly before us. We weren't aware of it at the time we were laying our plans. Unfortunately for it, it ceased after about three issues. It was published from Northern Ireland and it was called *Extrap*. It did have at least one thing to distinguish it in retrospect. I believe it published Ian McDonald's first couple of stories and he's gone on to be quite a major writer.

Initial finance was the result of a lucky break. *Interzone* began with some money that was left over from a science-fiction convention. Two *Eastercons* had been held in Leeds: *Yorcon 1* in 1979 and *Yorcon 2* in 1981 and for the second of these conventions I was chairman and Alan Doray and Simon Oursley were on the committee. We came out with a surplus of money. Conventions are not meant to be profit-making but in practice a few hundred pounds would sometimes be left over, because you had budgeted for contingencies. So we found we'd got about twelve or thirteen hundred pounds, which at the time was worth a lot more than it would be now. We'd budgeted for the art-show screens which we ended up getting free — we'd allowed money for hiring them but in the event we got them free from somebody working in the Art College in Leeds. So something we'd budgeted for didn't have to be paid for, and



we also got more 'walk-ins' (attendees who paid on the door) than we had expected. So we discussed what would be a good thing to spend this money on rather than fritter it away on some local festive or party. We thought starting a real science-fiction magazine would be a good idea.

So *Interzone* does really come out of the science-fiction fan base?

Oh yes, absolutely. So did *New Worlds* in the 1940s. If you look at the history of *New Worlds* magazine, it started off as a fan publication.

So that was the initial small lump of money we had. When the crew from London joined us we didn't put any money of our own in, not in the direct sense, but maybe indirectly (my recollection is that for the first year at least we didn't claim any expenses). But of course the other major way of raising funds before the first issue appeared was to solicit advance subscriptions. We got about 600 or so by the

time the first issue came out in the spring of '82 at a special prepublication offer rate — I think it was £4 instead of £5 for the first four issues. It started quarterly and remained quarterly for the first several years.

What about money from advertising?

Oh, terrible — almost impossible right from the start. Small ads were not much trouble but getting space advertising full-page or half-page ads was always very difficult at the beginning and in latter days too.

How did they manage in practice with all these editors?

Well we did obviously because we were still around after a couple of years, but at the end of that time the original eight had dwindled down to four or five in practical terms. It was run out of Malcolm Edwards's house in London — that was the official address, but at the end of the first year he wanted to be free of that responsibility and I took it over at that point, as the main contact person. By that time I was living in Brighton.

Did he want *Interzone* to have a particularly British flavour?

Yes, we weren't exactly nationalistic but we had a strong feeling that we wanted a magazine to fill the gap in the British scene. There were other SF magazines published in



By the time I was out of my teens my commitment was to a kind of science fiction best summarised by the work of J.G. Ballard, which seemed to be both science fiction and a serious literature about the present day and near future. It wasn't just Ballard. I was keen on writers like Brian Aldiss [left] and Thomas M. Disch and many of the writers associated with *New Worlds*.

America. There always had been, for all our lifetimes, and still are, like *F&SF* and *Analog* and letterly. Asimov's. In fact Asimov's, which I just mentioned, started in 1977 so it was fairly new at the time we started *Interzone*. It was there as an example — yes, it can be done! Even though that was in America we saw it could be done — even now, this is late day compared with the thirties and forties and fifties, it was possible to start an SF magazine and for it to flourish.

I commented that, unlike the older American magazines that I had seen, *Interzone* had never looked like a pulp. I asked about production values and artwork.

I initially wanted *Interzone* to be more book-like, more of a digest size like *F&SF* or Asimov's, but when we looked into the economics of it in Britain in 1962, it was a lot easier to print an A4 size saddle-stitched magazine. It was the cheapest option. When we looked into trade outlets like WH Smith, we discovered that's what they wanted. A small format magazine would get lost in the newsagents' shelves.

At the very beginning for the first year or two, we didn't have much in the way of artwork at all — a picture on the cover, obviously, but if you look at the early issues there would be a bit of title decoration here and there but no actual illustrations. What happened was that after my address became the main one for the magazine in 1963 and I was living in Brighton, I met Ian Miller, a local artist with an international reputation. I can't remember if he volunteered or I asked him, but he ended up becoming, on a

voluntary basis, *Interzone*'s art editor. So that lasted for another year or two — not a very long period, but long enough to give the magazine a definite visual appeal which it hadn't had.

He put a lot of illustrations, mostly by Brighton-based artists, into the magazine. It completely transformed the appearance from the rather blank text-only look that it had before to a more visually striking one with rather strange and unexpected artwork.

But Ian Miller, although he had illustrated a lot of science fiction books, is really a fine artist who doesn't come from a science fiction direction. He's got a weird imagination but he wasn't really a SF fan, although he liked the genre. So the look he was giving the magazine was not very generic. A lot of the artwork in those issues where he was art editor is weird. It's surreal, it's off the beam, but it's not science fiction art such as you traditionally saw in the pulp magazines. We liked it, but it got a mixed reception from readers, some obviously liked it but on the other hand we did keep meeting readers at conventions and in the science fiction world who didn't. They wanted space ships. They wanted traditional SF art — Jim Burns rather than Ian Miller.

So after Ian resigned as art editor I decided to carry on and do it myself. I selected the artists. We came round to using artwork that was more recognisably science-fictional. It wasn't better than what Ian had been providing but it was more generic and more popular with the majority of our readers.

Who was in the editorial set-up at that time? When the editorial address had moved to Brighton and Ian Miller was art editor?

Simon Gursley back in Leeds emerged as the lynch pin up there. The other two in Leeds had dropped out. Then we recruited Lee Montgomerie, who was someone I'd known for years. So she helped Simon Gursley up in Leeds and I did the rest from down here, with some of the ones who lived in London, like Roz Kaveney and Colin Greenland for a while, though both of them eventually dropped out. John Clute remained associated, but he was gradually sort of kicked upstairs to become an advisory editor.

By the mid eighties it was mainly myself and Simon Gursley. I had by then recruited Andy Robertson and Andrew Timmerah as assistant editors, who performed that chore admirably for nearly twenty years. And in later years, I think it was from 1995, another Brighton-based fellow came aboard — Paul Brazier, whose service as designer, typesetter and occasional guest editor of the magazine was invaluable.

During its first twenty years did *Interzone*'s content change, and were any particular trends reflected in the magazine?

I'm not sure the fiction content essentially changed. Obviously we have discovered a lot of good writers along the way who barely existed in 1962, so the personnel has changed, but some of the original writers are still there, people we first published in the 1960s. I'm glad to say I wouldn't say the fiction itself has changed drastically. We wanted to encourage good, literary intelligent SF, mainly British but, of course, it was never

exclusive, we published American writers and writers of other nationalities along the way — I think the national mix remained pretty constant.

As to trends, yes, obviously there were. As I said earlier, one of the things we were trying to encourage in the eighties was to get British writers to use the whole gamut of SF, not just be hung up on the New Wave and the Post New Wave and Ebbing New Wave or whatever you want to call it. They didn't all have to try to write like M. John Harrison or Chris Priest or J.G. Ballard. We thought it would be nice to discover new space opera or hard SF writers who were British and of course that did happen. I'm glad to say they came along.

By the late eighties, and certainly by the early nineties, half way through *Interzone*'s life to date, we were finding writers who were much keener on producing a new, reinvigorated version of something which uses the whole stretch of SF in an imaginative sense. I'm thinking of people like Stephen Baxter and Paul McAuley, and Eric Brown. These guys came along and they inspired another lot like Aleister Reynolds and Peter F. Hamilton and various others, some of whom have gone on

I met Ian Miller, a local artist with an international reputation. I can't remember if he volunteered or I asked him, but he ended up becoming, on a voluntary basis, *Interzone*'s art editor. So that lasted for another year or two — not a very long period, but long enough to give the magazine a definite visual appeal which it hadn't had



to great fame and success in the field. Peter Hamilton's books are block-busting best sellers — and they are space opera — old-fashioned SF in many ways, but done with a new kind of panache. Alastair Reynolds's novels likewise.

I'm not saying it's all down to *Interzone*, but quite a lot of writers have been encouraged to be self-conscious again about science fiction. In the late seventies and early eighties there was a kind of feeling of restriction in Britain, a sense that you couldn't really write SF without being Post New Wave.

Some people, Americans in particular, did accuse British SF at that time of being miserable. But it wasn't so much the emotional tone, whether optimistic or pessimistic, that bothered us. It was the fact that people were being constricted imaginatively. If just wasn't okay to write a space story set on the other side of the galaxy!

So, has *Interzone* influenced the way British science fiction has evolved?

That's really for others to say. It seems a bit immodest for me to say it, as editor of the magazine. But it's genuinely hard to judge. I mean, would writers like Alastair Reynolds or to take a different kind of writer, Kim Newman (who doesn't write space fiction but does a brilliant crossover between SF and horror) and Greg Egan (the Australian writer of hard-edged philosophical SF, and many others that we have published. . . .) How can we say that they wouldn't have emerged anyway? But we happened to be the magazine that published them first, we helped established the reputation of people like Baxter and Newman and McAuley and Egan and Richard Calder — and also Geoff Ryman to some extent.

So what was David's proudest achievement, apart from keeping the magazine going for so many years?

I suppose *Interzone* was the most successful of a small press movement in Britain, so I think without being too immodest we can genuinely say that the magazine helped reintroduce British science fiction again after a period when it had entered a kind of doldrums after the death of *New Worlds*.

Otherwise, mainly what I've just said — either discovering or helping from an early stage in their careers, so many new writers. We're not just talking about a handful. There have been dozens and dozens and dozens. Not all of them have gone on to greater things latterly. But there are people like Dominic Green, author of many funny and inventive stories who has yet to publish much elsewhere, and Chris Beckett, whose first novel, *The Holy Machine*, just came out. Tony Ballenryne who also has a first novel out this year, and Liz Williams, of course. So there's been a continual stream of people since the mid-eighties.

Wasn't there a particular crowning moment?

I remember when the magazine went monthly in 1990, at about the same time that Simon Dunsley dropped out. I suddenly realised I had gone from being one of the editors of a quarterly to being the virtually full-time editor of a monthly magazine. I remember feeling — this is great, although it was a lot more work and responsibility — that it was going well, firing on all cylinders, with lots of new writers. I think that was probably the peak period in some ways.

What about winning the Hugo, for goodness sake?

Obviously that was a symbolic high moment because it is the leading prize in the SF field. We won it in '95. We had had a nomination, i.e. we were one of about five nominated small-press magazines for several years. But we won it in '95, mainly because it was held in Glasgow at a British-based World SF convention so that meant there was a higher than usual proportion of British people present who were eligible to vote. I think that helped us along. It did happen at the right time when we had had a particularly good run for several years.

If he was starting a magazine now, is there any way he would do it differently?

No, not really. You have to understand that *Interzone* has always been a madcap scheme. Speaking to people in the news trade, speaking to the general public, people who are not SF fans, I find it's very hard for them to understand why we've done it. Why *Interzone* exists because it's all full of words and stories. Do people really want to read short stories nowadays? There are very few fiction magazines of any kind. Even the concept of a fiction magazine seems weird to the average person who works in W.H. Smith's nowadays. The magazine has always been a kind of labour of love. We've done it simply for the sake of having such a thing as a British science fiction magazine. It's not been done primarily to make money. I've met plenty of people in the publishing trade who say, "You should give that up and start something else". But of course I've never wanted to do that. I did once try to launch another magazine alongside *Interzone* called *Milieu*, but again, that wasn't really meant primarily to make money either — and it wasn't very successful, so I folded it after fourteen issues.

And any advice for magazine editors in general?

Well, if somebody wants to make money, I'd say go elsewhere! Go and produce a media magazine. It's anything to do with SF or fantasy. But if you have the same kind of motivation that we had, if your motivation is mainly to produce a platform for creative writers, then good luck! Go ahead. It still remains a valid thing to do.

And of course *Interzone* will carry on doing just that under Andy Cox.

WRITERS ON DAVID PRINGLE

Interzone has been a vital pillar of British SF for so long now that most people have forgotten certain pundits' early predictions that it would last no more than four issues. David Pringle's achievement of taking it to #193 is too often underestimated, just because the miracle kept up on us one issue at a time. David Langford of *Ansible* and multi-huged fame.

Interzone was one of the few SF magazines to reach Australia when I was still there, and Pringle had made something I always looked forward to reading. Naturally it became a goal to appear within those pages, but David was a hard taskmaster. When I finally got the acceptance for my first story there, I was overjoyed and could barely believe it. In typical fashion, he had some comments to make about the strengths and weaknesses, but said the story had "something". That was enough for me, and finally, David had seen something in my work that meant I was good enough for the magazine. Joy Cawston, of the novel *Wymhole* as well as numerous short stories.

David Pringle was the first editor to publish one of my stories, and thereby kick-started my career. Liz Williams, author of *The Poison Master*, *Nine Layers of Sky* and other novels.

And finally, from Brian Stableford (who has written so much I can't even start a list): "When I gave up SF writing for good in 1988, the last short story I ever wrote was rejected by *Interzone*, so when I started again in 1986, it seemed only polite to send the first one I wrote to the same place. In the interim, a cumbersome collective incapable of despising a camel had been summed down to a single knuck, permanently torn between the one-hump and two-hump models. Eventually, as all vocations tend to do, David Pringle's turned into a common-or-garden obsessive/compulsive disorder of the self-harming variety, but in the meantime he helped a few lame dogs over awkward stiles. If the grass had been greener on the other side of the stile he would have got the gratitude that was his due, but it wasn't."

Liz asked some eminent writers how David Pringle affected their careers.



famous for her part in *King Kong* (1933) died on 8 August aged 96. She also appeared in *Doctor X* (1932) and *The Vampire Bat* (1933) which partly inspired *Batman*.

CYBERBULLIES (remember Fandom.com?) still stalk the land, closing harmless Harry Potter fan sites and claiming that established fragments of our language are protected intellectual property. Now lawyers representing the Lord of the Rings film companies are busily menacing the owner of the Staremail.com domain because you see, 'Shire' is Tolkien's very own word which was his. Anyone daring to use it must be trading on valuable LOTR goodwill despite its having been around for a millennium.

Spot plq. Jasper Fforde: *The Well of Lost Plots*. Winners don't get the actual live plq. presented in memory of the Empress of Blundings, but receive a large fibreglass plq on wheels to keep for a year. • *The First Fendish Hall of Fame Award* for 2004 went to obsessive fantasy Brian Aldiss.

LAURENCE OLIVER 15 years dead is being dragged from his grave (or rather from footage in old films) to command a killer robot horde in the sf flick *Sky Captain and the World of Tomorrow* speaking new dialogue recorded by another actor. Hollywood has realized that deceased stars can't demand a percentage of the gross.



R.I.P. Fay Wray
(1907-2004), US actress
eternally famous for her
part in *King Kong* (1933),
died on 8 August aged 96.

She also appeared in
Doctor X (1932) and *The*
Vampire Bat (1933, which
partly inspired *Batman*)

RHYSLING AWARDS for 2003 sf/fantasy poetry
Long: Theodore Goss: *Octavia is Lost in the Hell*
of Masks (*Mythic Delirium*). Short: Roger Dutcher:
Just Distance. (Tales of the Unarticulated)

R.I.P. Jackson Beck (1912-2004) US radio
broadcaster who introduced over 1600 episodes
of the Superman radio show (*Voices: It's a bird!*
It's a plane! Beck: *It's Superman!*), died on 28
July aged 92. He was also the voice of Bluto in
300+ Popeye cartoons. • Jerry Goldsmith (1929-
2004) US composer of film music who won an
Oscar for his 1976 *Ocean* score, died from cancer
on 21 July: he was 75. Other genre films with
Oscar-nominated Goldsmith scores are:
Papermoon, *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* and
Planet of the Apes. He had many other sf/
fantasy credits (e.g. *Alien*) and also wrote the
music for the original TV *The Twilight Zone*. •
Fay Wray (1907-2004): US actress eternally

or so. People with domain names containing
other uniquely Tolkienian words — like elf,
dwarf, orc, one, ring or Sam — should start
preparing their defences now. Looking at all
these Fords on the official Middle Earth map, I
fear for davidianford.co.uk.

SIC, SIC, SIC: My favourite moment in media
coverage of the Cassini-Huygens mission came
from UK Meridian local news, which highlighted
the artistic angle: the probe was named
after Christian Huygens who discovered
Titan.

MORE AWARDS: John W. Campbell Memorial:
Jack McDewitt's *Omega*, with Justina Robson's
Natural History as runner-up. • Wodehouse Prize
for comic fiction (a case of Bollinger champagne
from one sponsor, the complete Everyman P.G.
Wodehouse from the other, and a Gloucester Old

THOG'S MASTERCLASS: *Zero Tolerance Dept.*
(or *The Wages of Washing*). I merely refer you
to our "Code of Light" drawn up in the dark
days of 1979 [] If a girl comes home here
covered in oil and grease or the soil itself she
can travel uncomplained. Otherwise she is liable
to get picked up on a trumped vice charge
[] such as being a "person of known vicious
private habits loitering for immoral purposes
etc." (Paul Chaikin: *The Living Germ* 1963). •
Dept of Urban Metamorphosis: Like a man in
wonderland Gordon Drew watched them for a
while, then he went further up the main street
and finally turned into a small teashop. (Hugo
Blayn [John Russell Fearn]: *Flashpoint* 1950). •
Hazards of Smoking Dept: Smith struck a
match and relighted his pipe. He began to pace
the room again. His eyes were literally on fire.
(Sas Rohmer: *The Mystery of Dr Fu*
Menchu 1933).



Alan Ball's *Six Feet Under* provides the clearest evidence yet of fantasy's unspoken mission to infiltrate and colonise mainstream drama

MIKE ODSCOLL



NIGHT'S PLUTONIAN SHORE

COMMENT



I can't say that I watch a great deal of fantasy-oriented TV these days. The appeal of *Butty* has passed me by — a by-

product of having watched the original movie while trying to while away the hours when I was running a video rental shop — and shows like *Babylon 5*, *Quantum Leap* and the later *Star Trek* spin-offs required too much of a commitment to keep up with. I'd occasionally catch an episode of one or another of these, and I'd always dutifully watch the first hour or two of the latest Stephen King mini-series. I sat through all of the Sci-Fi channel's adaptation of *Dune* and found myself comparing it unfavourably to Lynch's derelict and surreal interpretation, and I was bored by their take on *Le Gai's Laine of Neuren*. I guess the last two shows that belonged to the genre of the fantastic — by which I mean shows that were

explicitly marketed or consumed as SF or fantasy — were *Star Trek: the Next Generation* and *X-Files*. But even these two lost their hold on me before sputtering to their respective ends. So, despite the proliferation of fantasy, horror and SF on TV, I seemed to be watching much less. A slight depression, to illustrate how perceptions don't always concur with reality, to confirm my assumption about fantasy's colonisation of TV, I flicked through this week's TV guide (weekending 24 April), intending to count the number of such genre shows on terrestrial TV between six pm and midnight — time, and the fact that I do actually have a life, precluded satellite. On the five UK terrestrial channels I found not one showing that week, unless you count Channel 5's *Michael Jackson's Fare*. Maybe this had to do with there being alot of football and snooker broadcast that week, and anyway the lack was more than compensated for by the

screening of at least eight generic movies. But despite this aberration, there do appear to be more fantasy-derived shows on TV at present than at any time in recent memory.

Which is probably why, over the last four or five years, the tropes of fantasy have begun to infiltrate mainstream TV — particularly mainstream American shows. By which I mean shows not intentionally targeted at the genre audience. You might argue that this isn't really anything new — after all, Dennis Potter was injecting elements of the fantastic into otherwise realist dramas as far back as the early 80s with *Brimstone and Treacle* (1981) and later *The Singing Detective* (1986), and a surreal brand of British comedy — from *The Goons* to the *Pythons* and on to *The League of Gentlemen* — has never been shy of deploying weird and grotesque characters, unreal or otherworldly settings, and the kinds of extremes of violence

more commonly associated with fantasy and horror. While British TV drama has been slow to follow Potter's trail, American TV has, in the last few years, given us shows as *Oz*, *Nip/Tuck*, *The Sopranos*, *Arly McBeal* and, best of all, *Six Feet Under*—mainstream dramas which are unabashed about utilising the fantastic to varying degrees in order to interrogate, expose and subvert the mores and morals of the American way of life and death.

Alan Ball's *Six Feet Under*, the third series of which recently completed its run on Channel 4, provides the clearest evidence: yet of fantasy's unspoken mission to infiltrate and colonise mainstream drama. Okay, so it's a HBO production, which qualifies the tag 'mainstream' somewhat, particularly with regard to the size of its American audience in comparison to say *ER* or *24*. Yet the show has created an impact—in terms of critical attention and plaudits—way out of proportion to the number of its American viewers and, with its third series, has confirmed its status as the most intelligent and subversive fusion of the mundane and the fantastic on TV. *Six Feet Under*'s milieu is an L.A. funeral home, and its business is death. Or rather what it deals with is how we choose to live our lives while being conscious of our own mortality. While

and become a partner, while his wife Vanessa (Justina Machado) seems to be losing touch with reality. The younger Fisher son, David (Michael C. Hall), is attending couples therapy with his lover ex-cop Keith (Matthew St. Patrick); sister Claire (Lauren Ambrose), whose caustic tongue elevates teenage sarcasm to new levels of sophistication, has finished high school and has entered LAC Art school; mother Ruth (Frances Conroy) having dumped her Russian lover, is no longer trying so desperately to forge meaningful relationships with her offspring, being more preoccupied with her grandson and a teeny new age sister. And eldest son Nate (Peter Krause), having broken with adventurous but messed-up lover Brienne (Rachel Griffiths), has survived surgery to fix a malformed blood vessel in his brain and married Lisa (Lili Taylor), the mother of his ungrateful child.

Much of the narrative material seems—in on the surface at least—to be the stuff of soap opera: infidelity, family squabbles and secrets, life-threatening brain tumours, teenage angst, a rival firm attempting to take over the business, abortions, people who are variously repressed, confused, angry or neurotic, all turn up in *SFU*, but the manner in which these staples are treated is what makes the show as far removed from *Easterdays* or *ER* as Ballard's *SuperCannes*

might deploy the notion of parallel universes as revealing a means to circumventing cosmic catastrophe. *SFU* uses it to show Nate just a few of the ways his life turns out irrespective of the conscious choices he has made. In one reality he doesn't even exist as his father is seen with an entirely different family. If this adds to Nate's existential crisis, raising awkward questions about the degree of control he has over his own destiny, it also offers viewers an extratextual glimpse into the show's artificiality—of course Nate doesn't control his own life, it's written for him—which prompts us to face up to the same fears and uncertainties about our own lives. If all this sounds a tad pompous and gloomy, then Ball and his team of writers lighten the subject matter with a dark humour which makes it anything but. For example, among the realities Nate is shown by his father is one which reveals him to be a stodgy couch potato glued to an eccentric soap opera whose protagonists are given such lines as: 'We always end up in a universe in which we exist.' A knowing reference to those critics who dismissed *Six Feet Under* itself as soap opera.

The interactions between the one dead and four living Fishers, their partners, friends, associates and clients and the nature of their



shows such as *ER* and the new crop of old style police procedurals like *The Shield*. Without a Trace, CSI and its spin-offs would seem to foreground death, the conventions of melodrama inevitably dictate a morbidly pungent or moralising tone. Death precipitates the narratives, which are resolved through the familiar deployment of forensic science, interrogations, beatings, car chases and gunplay, regaled with the faux technical jargon required to confer an air of authenticity. Not so with *SFU*. Although each episode begins with a death—deaths which vary in manner from the absurd to the tragic—the storylines that follow are more organic than their openings would suggest, growing out of the sometimes banal, sometimes weird, day to day routines and interactions of the characters' lives. At the start of the third series, Federico Diaz (Diego Rodriguez), the Fishers' & Sons Funeral Home's mortician, has bought into the business



or Cochele Nights are from the oeuvre of Jackie Collins. For example, one of *SFU*'s recurring characters is the Fisher patriarch Nathaniel (Richard Jenkins), who happens to be dead. His incorporeality affords him the ability to intrude upon the thoughts and feelings of various members of his family, and to enter into a dialogue in which he is able to manipulate them into confronting their unconscious desires and motivations.

This makes for some intriguing and compelling scenarios, as in the opening episode of the third series. We see Nate on the operating table as the surgeons struggle to control a massive haemorrhage. The scene fades to white, before the following appears onscreen: NATHANIEL SAMUEL FISHER: 1965-2002. What follows is the only attempt I can think of outside of conventional SF TV, at dramatising the concept of quantum superposition. But whereas *Star Trek* or *Dr. Who*



relationships to each other, are constantly being disrupted and interrogated by devices we're more used to encountering in the genre of the fantastic. Apart from Nathaniel, other members of the dead feature prominently, forcing David to admit the extent of his repression, for instance, or fuelling Federico's ambition to be something more than the Fishers' cophers. More often than not, they're offering Nate unwanted advice, as when the ghost of one client accuses him of staying with Lisa out of a need to prove to himself what a good guy he is. Nate denies the accusation, but when the dead guy tells him to look me in the eye and tell me that sometimes you don't want to get in your car and just start driving and never look back, Nate's silence reveals his true feelings.

It is these elements of fantasy that allow the show to present a skewed or even inverted interpretation of American—well



Californian — society. The two are not necessarily equivalent. So whereas Nate's marriage seems founded on a misplaced sense of duty and a mix of guilt, confusion and duplicity, David's relationship with Keith in contrast appears more stable, open and honest, as they strive, through the process of therapy, to come to terms with admitting their own fears and desires. I say 'appears' because nothing in *SFU* should be taken for granted, and just as David and Keith seem to be settling themselves up as a gay alternative to the nuclear family unit their sexual experimentation — threesomes, roleplaying — reveals cracks in the relationship. Ruth, her look modelled on Grant Wood's painting, *American Gothic*, gets the hots for a man half her age, Arthur (Remn Wilson), the mortician's apprentice, himself set of as if he might have walked off the sets of *The Adams Family* and might murder the family in their beds — a fear ironically voiced by Ruth herself. That the oddball and reclusive Arthur turns out to be an intelligent, caring and sweet-natured young man, whose favourite movie is the SF film *Silent Running*, is a further indication of the show's willingness to subvert our assumptions about character. Claire's art teacher Olivier (Peter MacDissi) is an arrogant, four-month-old asshole but the show allows him the insight to know that, and it doesn't deny him his own moments of truth and wisdom. More ambiguity centres on Russell — Claire's boyfriend — specifically on his sexuality, without the writers feeling the need to make value judgements one way or the other.

Where *SFU* differs in its relationship with fantasy from *Ally McBeal* or *The Sopranos* is the extent to which the interaction between the real and the 'fantastic' has become so blurred as to make the latter an integral part of the show's structure and meaning. It is no more just about death, than it is really about family and relationships. Its subject matter is existence and the nature of reality itself, and it uses fantasy to set up a dialogue with those fundamental principles. Thus Brenda's emotional crisis in the second series — a fear of commitment driving her into a series of anonymous and increasingly reckless sexual encounters — has its roots in the degree to which her childhood was scrutinised and manipulated by her psychiatrist parents, and subsequently documented in a best-selling book called *Charlotte, Light and Dark*. Her impulsive and potentially dangerous sexual behaviour reads like an unconscious desire to rewrite the book of her own life. In one of the great comic/metaphysical moments from the third series, Brenda and her manic-depressive brother, Billy (Jeremy Sisto) are watching a video about the adventures of two cartoon characters — Nathaniel and Isabel — derived from the book of

Brenda's childhood. Billy becomes increasingly upset as he watches the video, finally freaking out because everything has changed and its not how he remembers this shared episode of their lives. Brenda, looking utterly bewildered — both by his reaction and the video itself — has to remind him that it isn't, after all, real.

On paper these intrusions of fantastical elements into the real might seem jarring, but such is the skill both of the writers in weaving weirdness into the show's narrative fabric and the conviction of the leading actors in interpreting their roles, that the strange and unreal seem entirely natural. Thus Nate's ongoing encounters with his dead father, rather than disrupting our sense of continuity and normality, seem an organic and necessary means to getting him to understand his own motivations.

Early in the third series, Nate invites Ruth's birthday party when he begins to feel spooked by the similarity between Lisa and his mother. When Nathaniel pops up to fuel Nate's growing existential crisis by suggesting that it's the two of them who are truly alike, we know that he's speaking a truth Nate hasn't yet accepted. 'You're a funeral director, which you never wanted to be, just like your old man. You married a woman you knocked up because it was the right thing to do, just like your old man. Horrified. Nate claims that he's different because he really loves his family, to which his old man responds, 'Buddy boy, you think I would have stuck around if I didn't love mine?' Although the scene has comic undertones, it makes explicit Nate's — and the show's — preoccupation with living with the choices we make while knowing that nothing we choose can prevent our inevitable demise. Having survived a life-threatening surgical procedure, Nate is more aware of the fragility of life than most, and this awareness is constantly causing him to question the choices he has made. This boils down to a fear that he married Lisa for all the wrong reasons, a fear that prompts visions of escape and feelings of profound guilt in equal measure.

In one of the alternate realities Nate glimpses at the start of the third series, he sees himself married to Brenda. Much of the subsequent series sees him struggling against the attraction of that life, an attraction felt too by the viewer (this one, at least), particularly by those who reject Lisa's unquestioning acceptance of a new agey form of predestination. For Nate — accused by Brenda in the light that culminated in their break-up of choosing to be with someone as fucked up as herself in order to make him feel more like a responsible adult — such an acceptance represents what he fears most: a loss of control about the direction his life is taking. Throughout the third series, he's

constantly plagued, teased and tempted by visions and visitations of how things might have turned out had he made different choices. The beauty — and the maturity — of the show is that Nate and Lisa don't simply call it quits because they're pissed off at finding it harder than expected to make their relationship work. Gradually, after repeatedly misinterpreting each other's motivations and emotions, they seemed to be reaching an understanding and level of trust — only for Lisa to disappear. Rather than making it easier for the viewer by revealing her fate, the writers allow us only to know what Nate knows. As an example of how seamlessly the show fuses fantasy and reality, take Nate's series of dreams/visions of possible explanations regarding Lisa's disappearance. Each is short, unobtrusive in narrative terms, and yet the honesty and emotional rawness of what they reveal about Nate is gutwrenching. That Lisa might have run off with an ex-lover both absolves him of responsibility for desiring an end to their relationship while at the same time confirming his guilt at already having wished for its ending. Her possible murder or suicide, from the point home — has this happened because of what he did — or rather didn't — feel? If he had acted differently towards her, would she still be with him? And if she was, would he still be playing the role of husband and father, secretly resenting Lisa for preventing him from leading one of the other lives he has seen?

I've hardly touched on the variety and richness of the plots, themes and ideas that feature in *SFU* on its ability to walk a tightrope between popular drama and its more highbrow preoccupation with psychological, philosophical and moral matters, or on the way it doesn't manipulate its characters into clichéd modes of behaviour to make it easier for us to like them. Whether it's David's doormat tendencies, Nate's self-delusion, Brenda's ability to keep fucking up, Lisa's now age, vegan puppy, Claire's willingness to always fall for the wrong guy or Ruth's grand dark flights of fancy, we feel compelled to keep watching to maintain a connection to lives which, however absurd and embarrassing, remain gloriously human. And I haven't even mentioned the soundtrack, the eclectic mix of mainstream artists like Coldplay and Bibo, and more wayward talents such as Beck, Todd Rundgren and The Eels. As with fantasy, it uses music to emphasise a theme or to provide an ironic contrast to a situation or mood. Most fittingly, it uses music diaphanously to provide us with another glimpse into the memories and emotions of its character, nowhere more poignantly than where Hank Williams provides the soundtrack to Ruth and George's (James Cromwell) wedding party back at the Fisher's house of the not-so-dead.



AN INTERZONE PROMOTIONAL FEATURE

Reduce. Improve. Prevent.



£7.99
RRP

An ATMO product

AIR CUBE™

CREATED BY ANTONY MANN

'I first saw an ad for Air Cube in a small catalogue that came by every month or so with the other junk mail we've been cursed with ever since my wife did her shopping that way one Christmas. This particular catalogue was not a showcase for heritage dart boards or shapeless sweaters or three-inch grey garden fairies, but one of those innovation-style jobs filled with gizmos and doodads, products such as Hair Follicle Expungers and Jet-stream Shoulder Pads, items built for our times and thus extraneous to any lifestyle not yet completely warped by the constant need for novelty ...'

ATMO

I first saw an ad for Air Cube in a small catalogue that came by every month or so with the other junk mail we've been cursed with ever since my wife did her shopping that way one Christmas. This particular catalogue was not a showcase for heritage dart boards or shapeless sweaters or three-inch grey garden fumes, but one of those innovation-style jobs filled with gizmos and doodads, products such as Hair Follicle Expanders and Jet-stream Shoulder Pads, items built for our times and thus extraneous to any lifestyle not yet completely warped by the constant need for novelty.

They were things that you might fleetingly think you wanted when you first saw them on the page, but knew with certainty that you would never use as soon as they arrived in their cardboard boxes eight times smaller than you'd imagined them to be.

I only saw the ad at all because Jill was in the living room leafing through the catalogue as I was passing through from the study to the kitchen to make more coffee, and she said, 'Oh look, an Air Cube.'

I peered over her shoulder, and there it was, Air Cube.

'An Air Cube?' I said. 'What's that?' It looked like any of those gizmo things might look.

'It's just an Air Cube,' said Jill.

AIR CUBE said the ad, above a photo of an empty transparent cube of indeterminate size, filled with what may well have been air. Below the photo, unlike any of its neighbours, I could see no persuasive exhortation in twenty words or less describing the incredible benefits that would immediately accrue upon purchasing this life-altering device. There were just a price (£7.99) and a corporate trademark symbol (ATMO), and three words:

REDUCE. IMPROVE. PREVENT.

'Hm,' I said. 'An Air Cube. How airy. How... cubic.'

'Maybe I'll get one. It says it helps you to reduce.'

'No it doesn't. It just says, REDUCE. What the hell does that mean? Anyhow, you're fine the way you are.'

'You don't think I need to reduce?'

'Reduce what? Your use of electricity? The length of your sentences? What?'

'To be honest, I have been feeling a little fed up with things lately. Maybe reducing would help.'

'So what if you feel fed up? We all do, it shows we're alive. If you weren't fed up, then there'd be something wrong.'

Jill thought about it for a moment, then made her decision. 'I think I'll get one, Doug. I'll get one for you too, shall I?'

'Don't get me one,' I said. 'I've got a bunch of those kind of things that your idiot brother bought me for the last eight Christmases. Executive twiddle games and shower clocks and you remember that vibra-pullover I used to frighten the cat next door? Hey, I've got an idea. Why don't you buy him an Air Cube?'

'You're a very difficult person to buy for, Doug. He just never knows what to get you, that's all.'

'Jeez, he knows I like whisky, why doesn't he get me that?'

'Because he doesn't want to get you the same thing every year. Anyhow, do you want one or not?'

I didn't, but generously, Jill got me one anyway. They arrived in different boxes on the same day in the same white van, delivered by the man who drove it. The vehicle had ATMO painted on the outside in large black letters. The guy was kind of surly, but deft with a clipboard.

'So who's ATMO then?' I asked him as I signed for the boxes.

'What do you mean?' he said.

'The company. Who are they?'

'They're the people who make Air Cubes,' said the guy, slowly for my benefit.

'What if we don't like them? Is there a returns policy?'

The guy just looked at me and shook his head like I was some kind of idiot, and walked off.

Air Cube was four inches by four inches by four, as cubic as you could get. It was transparent, made of what could well have been plexiglass, and there appeared to be no way in - or out - of it. Most likely, it was filled with air. There were no instructions in the boxes, just invoices from ATMO reading AIR CUBE £7.99 and squares of white card which I had half expected to be there and upon which were written just three words.

REDUCE. IMPROVE. PREVENT.

Jill and I sat at the dining room table and set our cubes down in front of us. We looked at them. We turned them over in our hands: they were light, almost insubstantial in themselves. We swapped them over, then swapped them back.

'Hm,' I said. 'Air Cubes.'

'I think... I think I like them,' said Jill uncertainly. Then she became more sure of herself: 'No, I like them, I do.'

'Feeling any reduction yet?' I asked.

A few weeks later, I began to notice Air Cube ads in other publications - newspapers, lifestyle magazines, local free sheets. Then, a week or two after that, the Air Cubes themselves began to appear, here and there. I started seeing them on the dashes of cars stopped at traffic lights, just sitting there, reflecting the dazzle from outside. I spotted a kid walking to school, showing his Air Cube to his mates.

On the weekend, I went round to watch the football at my neighbour Tom's place, and sitting down in the living room, saw that he and Janie had one on top of their TV, a box on the box so to speak.

'Got an Air Cube, then,' I said.

'Yeah, got an Air Cube. Janie's boss Neil had one, so she ordered one too.'

'Air Cube,' I said.

'Cube,' Tom nodded.

It was about as far as that particular conversation was going to go. At half time, though, an ad for Air Cube came on, the first one I'd seen on telly. There were no people in the ad, just the cube itself, spinning in digital space, and then, one after the other, three words appeared on the screen in blue letters:

REDUCE. IMPROVE. PREVENT.

It was kind of spooky, or it might have been, if Tom hadn't said, 'Hey look, an ad for Air Cube! Kind of spooky, isn't it?'

We both laughed. Janie came in and asked if we wanted more beer, then went over to adjust the lean of a painting on the wall.

'I think that's an improvement,' she said. 'Don't you?'

On Monday, I showed my actual face at the office instead of just sending work in from home, and walking down through the open plan towards my cubicle, I saw that about half the people already had Air Cubes on their desks. Later, sitting at my own desk, trying to concentrate on an assortment of papers and what was written on them, I couldn't help but overhear a conversation over the cubicle wall out by the coffee machine.

'I'm using mine for reductions,' a young woman was saying - Kirsty, I think it was, from Human Resources.

'How's that going?' asked some guy.

'It's difficult to say for sure, but pretty good I think. There's

definitely some things getting reduced, at least that's how it seems. What about you?"

A second guy came up then and I heard as he stuck a plastic cup under the nozzle of the coffee machine and pressed the buttons for coffee and milk and waited while the water swooshed into his cup.

"Preventing," said the first guy. "Been preventing, just round the house. Hadn't known before how much there was to prevent, but the Air Cube seems to focus your energies on it, you know?"

"You find that too?" said Kirsty. "That's amazing."

"Amazing," said the guy.

Now the second guy chipped in. "Jeet not you too? You're not going on about Air Cube, are you?"

"Well, there's no need to be aggressive about it!" said Kirsty.

"Aw come on!" said the new guy. "What is it with those things anyway? How come everyone has to have one?"

"Maybe you should get one," Kirsty said. "You might find it helps you to reduce your cynicism and your anger."

"It's the kind of thing I'm trying to prevent," said the other guy.

Saturday, the ads started appearing for Air Spheres, in magazines and newspapers, on television, on the internet. As registered Air Cube owners, we received a personalized letter from ATMO. I say personalized, because Jill's name was in the little envelope address window, but really all it amounted to was a printed order form flyer which said:

AIR SPHERE £7.99. FROM ATMO. REDUCE. IMPROVE. PREVENT.

There was a printed photo, too, of a transparent sphere, which was quite likely filled with air.

"Look Doug," said Jill as she showed me the form. "Air Sphere. It says you can reduce."

"Is that reduce more or reduce the same?"

"It doesn't say."

"Haven't you reduced a lot already?" I asked her.

"Can you ever make enough reductions?" she said.

It was the same delivery guy, but this time the ATMO van was bigger. It turned out that was because the Spheres were bigger than the Cubes, so the boxes needed to be bigger, and hence, the vans. Probably the factories were bigger too, come to think of it.

The guy had the same clipboard, though, and he offered me the same pen with which to put down the same signature.

"So Air Spheres now," I said, to annoy him.

It seemed to work, because he gave me another of those looks and said, "Yes."

"What do we do with the Cubes now that we've got the Spheres?"

"What do you want to do with them?"

I hadn't known what to do with them before the Spheres had arrived, so I was hardly likely to know now. So I said, "Some price, I see. How do they do that, make them for the same price?"

"I don't know," he said. "Would you like me to ask them?"

"If you wouldn't mind."

"Well I'll make sure I do that, then, Mr. . . ." He looked at the clipboard, "Mr Fucking Idiot. And yes, before you say anything, there is a need to be sarcastic and abusive."

He walked off, accompanied by my admiration.

The Air Spheres were the size of a bowling ball, and transparent and light to lift. There had been some reported cases of people

breaking open their Air Cubes and finding air inside, sometimes even breathing it, so presumably it was the same with the Spheres.

Air. There were no Air Sphere stands or holders or brackets, however, so in the way of spherical objects, they tended to roll about a bit and get in the way. Jill, however, gave every appearance of liking hers, and seemed to think it was helping her to make a few more reductions about the place, and mine didn't seem to be doing me any harm. Indeed, if I were to be completely honest about it, I might sometimes have imagined that there were certain slight but unquantifiable improvements in the quality of certain things. Certain things possibly being prevented, too.

People with Air Cubes were all starting to get the Air Spheres, and of course all the time other people were catching up by buying their Cubes, so there was a good mix of Cubes and Spheres to be seen around the place, at schools and parties, down at the mall, in the streets. Then, a few weeks later, the order form for the Pyramids arrived, and we bought them straight away.

Heck, they were only £7.99.

It was different delivery man this time, but he was still encouragingly rude.

"Where's the other guy?" I asked as he unloaded the giant Air Pyramid boxes out of the back of the ATMO truck.

"What other guy?" he said.

"The guy who brought us the Cubes and the Spheres."

"He's been taken in for brain-pattern adjustment. How the fuck would I know? Maybe it's his day off. And listen, I'm warning you, if one more person asks me how they do it so cheap, I'll smash a Pyramid over your head."

"How do they do it so cheap?" I asked.

"Beats me."

The Air Pyramids were transparent, and surprisingly light. They were of the four-sided variety, with one metre-long vertices. It doesn't sound like much, but stick a couple in your living room, and see if it doesn't make a difference to the décor. They were a little like the pyramids that hippies used to build to sit under in the sixties in order to channel pyramid energy and keep apples fresh and sharpen their razor blades, but the Air Pyramids were sealed, so there was none of that malarkey going on. Some people did, I think, take a side off their Pyramid, but the general consensus was, if you did that, you impaired your chances of making reductions or improvements or of preventing things, so it was a rarely-seen practice. Jill and I didn't so much like the Pyramids as get used to them – in the same way as we'd become accustomed to the Cubes and the Spheres – although Jill was almost certain that her Pyramid might be contributing in some way to qualitative reductions at least. For myself, I may well have been preventing some things without even knowing it, that was the way with the Pyramids, it was difficult to tell.

Pretty soon, the take-up of the Pyramids began to mirror that of the Cubes and Spheres, so that a natural saturation level was reached – and the level was high. A few people who got the Cubes or the Spheres didn't bother with the Pyramids, but there were not many in that camp, and conversely, a few new Pyramid owners got rid of their Cubes and Spheres. They never became true rubbish, however, only began to float around society as it were, so that if you wanted to, if you needed a spare for the shed or for work or the car, you could just pick yourself up another Cube or Sphere from a park bench or a bus shelter or a café, they were lazily lying there in some manner integrating themselves into the welt and weave. There were a very few

people who had neither Cube nor Sphere, and it was this small group which in the main refrained from buying the Pyramids, and, some weeks later, the Domes as well.

A complete Air Dome was only £7.99, so naturally we got one. This time, it was only the people with two houses who bought two.

It was the original delivery guy, back again after having his brain patterns adjusted.

'How do they manage to do it so cheap?' I asked as he and two helpers in ATMO overalls unloaded the crates from the back of the lorry.

'Listen, do you want it or not?' said the guy in a voice that implied a deeply bored antagonism but was really just his idea of people skills.

'Seven ninety-nine for the whole Dome?' I said. 'Can we, like, have a free TV with that? Something to put in it?'

'We'll put air in it,' said Jill from over my shoulder. 'It's an Air Dome, it's for air.'

'What if we don't like it?' I said.

'Take an axe to it,' said the guy. What sort of a job had they done adjusting his brain patterns? A poor one if you ask me.

We didn't like it. But we didn't dislike it either. Once it had been erected by the ATMO Erection Team which turned up an hour later in their ATMO overalls, the Air Dome fitted snugly over our house, and its many square, triangular and circular apertures let enough air in for any breathing we might feel inclined to do.

When it was done and the Erection Team had gone, we stood outside on the footpath, Jill and I, and looked back at our house with a vague interest. The Dome seemed to be made of some kind of tough but very fine plastic. The solid sheeting was transparent, almost invisible, and where the ATMO team had cut a hole for us giving unfettered access to the front door, you could hardly see the edges.

'Well there it is,' said Jill. 'The Air Dome.'

'That's it all right,' I agreed.

'Air Dome,' she said.

'Air.'

'I think it's a big improvement,' said Jill. 'Don't you?'

'Shall we go in?'

A few days later, if we stood on the footpath, we could look down the street and see a dozen Air Domes, maybe more – or rather, hardly see them at all.

The Domes caught on, and pretty soon everybody had one, and then, soon after that, the collection bins appeared on the street corners. They were ATMO bins, they were large, and ATMO sent everyone a letter requesting that people take their Air Cubes and Air Spheres and Air Pyramids and deposit them in the bins. REDUCE it said at the bottom of the letter. Everyone had their Domes now, there was no real need for a Cube or a Sphere, and so the bins quickly began to fill. Then, for a few days, ATMO clean-up squads filled the streets, rounding up all the Cubes, Spheres and Pyramids which had contrived to escape into the wide world.

After that, the rains came, two days of solid driving unforecast precipitation, and when they had gone, so had the Domes. It seems they were actually made of some kind of soluble plastoid stuff which literally melted and ran away harmlessly when it came into contact with water. From the window, we watched our own Dome disappearing, sluiced into the drains and leaching into the soil. It turned out to be great for the plants. Even worms

are it and got big and fat. And when it had gone, so had ATMO. So it went, we thought. So the cookie crumbled. So we thought.

Jill and I took were taking breakfast in the living room, as we always did. Breakfast was always quiet, it was a quiet time of day, but today, our peace was shattered by a racket starting up outside. I got up and went over to look out the window. It was the guy from across the road, shouting and carrying on.

'What is it?' asked Jill.

'Guy from across the road. Shouting and carrying on.'

Like the guy across the road from him that I was, I went out to see what all the fuss was about.

I didn't know the guy's name, we'd been on polite nodding terms for about twelve years, but that's as far as it had got. But I knew he was one of the few who hadn't bought into the Air Cube thing – like one or two other places in the street, there'd never been an Air Dome over his house. Now, he was jumping up and down and waving a piece of paper around, and he was angry.

'I'm not paying this!' he was yelling. 'You must be mad, I'm not paying it! I'm not, I tell you, there's no way, you hear me? I'm not paying it!'

God knew who he was talking to – and maybe it was God, because he did appear to be looking up to the sky, shaking his fist as though there were some kind of dark and vengeful entity up there, bent on repressing him.

A moment later, the postman walked down past our place and dropped the mail off. I saw that there was an ATMO letter on top of the pile, addressed to Jill, and at once began to open it.

'What's his problem?' The postman nodded at the bloke who was still carrying on, jumping up and down like a fool. A few other people had come out to see what was happening.

'Doesn't want to pay,' I said.

'Doesn't want to pay what?' asked the postman.

'Not sure.'

'Ha,' said the postman. As he walked off on his round, I fished the ATMO letter out of the envelope and took a gander. It was a bill.

AIR it said. NOT AIR CUBE or AIR SPHERE or AIR PYRAMID or AIR DOME. Just, AIR. And underneath, BILLING PERIOD: 14-06-08 to 13-07-08. PLEASE PAY ATMO £7.99. Then, underneath that, REDUCE. IMPROVE. PREVENT.

I saw now that Tom from next door had come out too to look at the shouting guy, and had just gotten his own bill from the postman. Tom waved his bill at me. 'Hey Doug, check it out! More ATMO stuff!' He waved his arms then, in the air, all around.

'Air!' I said to Tom. 'Air!'

'Air!' he agreed.

The guy over the road was waving his arms too, still prancing and jumping about.

'What's his problem?' Tom asked me.

'Doesn't want to pay,' I said.

Before I went back inside to tell Jill about the new ATMO thing, I took the time to suck in a deep breath. A whole lungful of air. Hmm, not bad. And only £7.99 a month.

Antony's stories have appeared in *Cinemaware*, *The 3rd Alternative*, *Elery Green's Mystery Magazine* and many other places. His first collection *Milo & I* is available now from Elastic Press. His first short film *Billy's Day Out* premiered this year in Toronto and has screened in London, Cambridge and at the Edinburgh International Film Festival. He is currently working on a number of other screen projects.

Mat Coward

SUCCESS



...And How to Avoid It

There are thousands of books for writers and would-be writers. Some of them are even useful. But a lot more people make a living writing Howtoite books than make a living as a result of them. The 'How To Make A Million With Your Pen In Four Easy Lessons' guide is part of a huge, rich, somewhat distasteful industry, based on two well-known facts about human nature.

1. Everyone who can write a shopping list thinks they could write a book
2. Everyone who thinks they could write a book thinks they should write a book

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STEVE MOHN

SONG OF THE EARTH



Coe Connik and Fergus rode over on horseback for lunch. Coe, in a shirt of red parachute fabric and blue denim jeans, pulled the reins with one hand.

'She's a new one,' Tyle Ryko said, stroking the round jawl, gazing into the brown liquid eye. 'Yeah, haven't seen you before.'

'This is Tonka,' Coe said, dismounting. 'Stubborn like a mule.'

When the horses had been given grain and water and tied in the shade of Tyle's red maple, and the three were seated at the table inside, Coe said: 'They found your Uncle Gil.'

Tyle set down the pitcher she'd been pouring from, touched her forehead. 'Not alive.' But looked the question at them.

Coe shook her head. 'He must have died instantly, like falling off a cliff. It still amazes me that we lived.'

But Gil's bones were infused with his biogram.

'The Song didn't wipe it out,' Coe said, 'It's like your Aunt Lin.'

Tyle nodded. The Song had broken down only the biograms the Call Tree had assigned, not the rogue biograms that had assigned themselves to people like Tyle's Aunt Lin, who had died in The Song. 'So Gnostic was right about Gil,' said Tyle, remembering.

Coe nodded. 'Rogue nology. That's why Gil was so hooked on it. Thing is, the mayor over that way needs to know what to do. Seeing it's your uncle.'

Rogue biograms had to be atomized. The Song had swept Gallajen clean of everything the Call Tree had assigned, but threat lurked in relics like Gil's bones. Aunt Lin's bones had been atomized, painful for Tyle to arrange and endure. She felt this practice had reached its useful end. She had studied since The Song, felt sure no biogram could reassert itself, that nature limited what brute matter could do without intelligent guidance.

Her opinions were respected though not universally shared. Yet Tyle Ryko had made the Call Tree sing. Her preferences could not be ignored. 'What's the mayor want to do?'

'Atomize.' Coe glanced at Fergus.

But Fergus stayed out of it, as he had then, and gazed at the lake.

Tyle Ryko, fifteen, thrust her fingers in her thick tawny hair. Through her teeth she told Uncle Gil: 'I will not climb the Call Tree!'

'You can't escape this,' her uncle said, fatalistic as always. 'Go back in and look at Aunt Lin.'

Tyle didn't have to. The image was burned onto her eyelids. Her Aunt Lin had been in the vine woods, cutting fur, a task she had done a thousand times, but had returned feeling nauseated, weak and already showing the yellow skin of pumdice. Before noon she had dropped into a coma, her skin a wet shiny orange textured with tiny buds, each tipped with the organic circuitry of a biogram. No telling what the biogram had been for, a rogue nology mutated since the Landing long ago, dormant in the dirt, waiting for someone to inhale and integrate it.

Tyle made her frustrated gesture one of grooming, doing her long hair up in a loose knot. 'That won't happen to me.'

'It will,' Gil said. 'Sure as day.'

She wagged her head. 'I've been breathing the air and drinking water here fifteen years.'

The green filaments of Gil's calling traced his rises. 'I told Lin time and again to climb. And look at her. She could've had a proper calling. Now she's in a rogue coma.'

'She'll come out of it,' Tyle reasoned hopefully. 'People do. Or they turn it to a calling, by and by.'

'Not much, they don't,' Gil walked away.

He was right: rogue biograms often showed no adaptive purpose. Mutated, they were biotechnological nonsense, mere noise

forging symbioses with people to no point anyone could see. Once, a man in Hometown caught a rogue biogram that would not let him sleep, made him eat dirt and drove him to stand in thunderstorms, arms wide, delicate silver veins traced on his skin. In one sense, he hadn't lasted long but in another he had. Repeated lightning strikes had fused him to a solid post. Gil had taken Tyle to see him, warning her, shaking a finger green with the filigrees of his own symbiote: 'If you don't climb the tree and get yourself a calling, one'll grab you for sure! Don't be like your aunt!'

But Tyle saw her uncle's greenish skin circuitry as a curse. All it did was let him predict changes in weather. Hardly useful, in Tyle's opinion: the weather on Gallajen varied only mildly.

She watched him enter the house of vine wood with a thatch roof, one of dozens grouped around a spring in the lee of a cliff. Winters, they skated on the frozen spring-fed pond or looked through the black ice for biograms locked like bubbles in glass. Not that you could see biograms but you could play at seeing them. And tell one another what kind you eventually wanted, how high up the tree you would climb - understanding that the higher you climbed before one caught you, the more valuable it could turn out be. Or you might swear, as Tyle had, that you would never climb, never disfigure yourself, stay Clean. And kids who meant to climb would mock you, but that you would too climb or you'd get to be like that Post Man in Hometown.

'Will not!'

'Will root!'

Tyle faced west, the grassy hills purple in the gloaming, the breeze fresh, and thought of the Call Tree, said to be taller than anything on Gallajen, not an actual tree but a factory that had become treelike to sustain itself throughout the introduction of humans, helping them be what the planet required them to be, while keeping them human.

Some felt the adaptation was complete, that the planet knew the people, no longer made them sucken and die. Clean people, like Tyle, intending to stay Clean, left villages like hers, forging east, putting distance between the Call Tree and themselves.

Poor Aunt Lin, she thought. We should have gone east long ago. But Gil - the Cleans wouldn't want him around. The thing was getting ugly, in Tyle's opinion. Where would it end?

A Gnostic trotted up from the spring on all fours like a small green gorilla. They made the rounds of villages to help with biogram adjustments. They could not remove biograms or install them but could plug into them, tell if they were rogue nology and diagnose what they did. All Gnostics were alike - and all were called Gnostics. They were of the same stuff as the Call Tree but animate. This one saw Tyle and spoke: 'I mourn for you, Tyle, and taste your pain.'

Sadly, she said, 'Here, Gnostic,' and extended one arm. It jumped like a cat, caught her arm, swung onto it like a monkey and perched on her shoulder. 'What brings you around?'

'Knew you,' it said. 'Tasted you on the air.'

'Did not. You came from the spring. Wind's blowing the other way.'

It sorted through her thick hair. 'Knew you still. Winds wash around - subtle. I'm subtle.'

She brushed away at tiny sorting fingers. 'My hair's clean.'

'Like you,' said Gnostic. 'Clean.' It stopped and simply perched.

She gazed at the eastern sky, its glitter including the Earth star. ... Tyle tried to find it. ... well, one of them, anyway. 'My uncle wants me to climb.'

'Climb,' said Gnostic. 'With me. What I'm for. Help.'

'I don't want a calling.'

Gnostic sat still. 'You could make the tree sing. I taste it.'

'Simp,' Tyle shrugged. 'More like, I'd just get claws, like Coe did.'

Coe was Tyle's best friend. The Call Tree had given her horrific claws on hands and feet.

'Good for climbing trees,' said Gnostic, because it could joke, a little. The point of climbing trees was lost on a planet that had only vines that scaled cliffs or grew far along the ground to enormous length, so big their sturdy side shoots provided lumber, the fibrous bark thatch for roofs.

And you could climb the Call Tree only once. Nothing happened if you climbed twice - no biogram would let another in. People had climbed several times hoping the tree might recall the biogram already bestowed but to no avail.

'If it wasn't just luck,' Tyle said. 'If you could call what you wanted -'

'Tree knows best,' said Gnostic, small head lifted sagely.

'Tree knows shit,' Tyle said. 'Get off.' She gave it her hand, lowered it to the ground. Then relented and sat beside it. There were no people out. Slap lights glowed in windows, yellow or white, some the pale green of summer lightning. The night deepened, the wind picked up. 'Why's the Call Tree have to sing anyway?' Tyle asked.

'Singing is attractive.'

She looked hard at Gnostic. 'You mean pretty?'

Gnostic sat staring west.

'You don't mean just pretty, do you?' Tyle asked forcefully.

'Attractive in the magnetic, gravitational senses. Attractive to Coe's claws, to Gil's meteorological ability. Attractive to callings.'

Tyle had seen magnets work and she knew what gravity was. She looked hard at Gnostic. Callings had to become unnecessary one day. Only the tree could make it happen. 'Why do you think I can make the tree sing?' she asked.

'Everyone has a different taste. You, Tyle, taste Clean.'

'That again - you trying to make me think I can climb without catching anything?' She smirked at this implausibility.

Gnostic raised its small hard head. 'Can't lie.'

True, thought Tyle. Anyway, it felt as if it ought to be true.

'Have you tasted Aunt Lin?' she asked.

'Have.'

'And?'

'An aquatic adjuster, mutated. Thinks it's fruit.'

Crazy stuff - horrible - awful! She blamed Uncle Gil for insisting they stay where you could catch rogue nologies. The stubborn man had risked his wife and his brother's only child just to wear them down and make them submit. Lin had never meant to, certain the worst rogues must have degraded by now.

Wrong.

'So will the tree sing?' Tyle asked. 'Like if someone climbs to the top?'

'I must do my rounds.' Gnostic lit out for the pond, too quick to stop.

'Hey!' she called, standing.

The cliff face echoed *Hey!* - as if it had spoken.

Tyle turned and went into her Aunt's and Uncle's house. They

had raised her from the age of five. Tyle's parents had died in a cave-in. Mining. Both had received the same assignments from the tree, giving them, along with the usual immunities, a blisful sensitivity to the ores of conductive metals. Gold, silver and copper ores sang to them, drew them to the rocks that bore them like Sirens drawing Odysseus's wayward Greeks onto the rocks to drown for love of sweet singing. An old story and an odd one to tell children who were expected to climb a tree in hopes of making it sing one day.

Uncle Gil had slapped on a light and hung it near the pulley on which they had lain Aunt Lin when the cutting crew brought her from the vine woods. Lin lay breathing, her skin wet orange in the lamby light, the circuitry darker at the tips of thousands of tiny nubs - in deep for sure, Tyle thought.

Unless the Call Tree sang it out.

It can't be true about me, Tyle thought, that I can make the tree sing.

But she wondered how she might climb high. No one had climbed to the top. 'It's at the top,' she guessed aloud.

Where else would an antidote to biograms be but of reach?

Nuts, she thought. Gnostic's wrong. They can be wrong. They're just little ding-dong pet things.

'You?' Coe said. 'Climb?' She squinted at Tyle.

Coe Konnak had sharp features, eyes black as marbles, with finely-spoked mauve irises. Her hair had gone black with symbiosis, stiff as brush wire, missing in what seemed random patches. Coe had done what she could to turn disaster into fashion. She had climbed the tree at twelve, struggling halfway then waking on a bow with black curled claws on fingers and toes - claws for climbing vines to pick the high fruit. Her biogram had written a black net of lace and ladders up and down her skin.

Sitting on her heels, claws draping her knees, Coe shook her head. Looked west. 'Know how far it is?'

'Two, three days,' Tyle said.

'Take food for five days. You have to bulk up for the climb.'

Coe gazed through thinned eyelids toward where she knew the tree stood, the fair breeze stirring her black brushy hair. 'Why the change?'

Tyle told her what Gnostic had said the night before. 'Also, sitting up with Aunt Lin, thinking, What if I do reach the top?'

Coe nodded to one side. 'You're ambitious, anyway.'

Tyle drew pictures in the dirt with the tip of her knife. 'Thought I'd better cut my hair. The tawny mass weighed on her shoulders.'

'Good thought,' Coe agreed.

They fell silent.

'Climb with me,' said Tyle.

Coe shook her head. 'No way the tree'll take back my stuff.'

'I'll need help getting all the way up. And you know how to climb. Maybe climbing together we can fool the tree.'

Coe tipped her head. 'I don't know...'

'Come on,' said Tyle. 'You, me and Gnostic climb the tree, maybe get it to sing. End this. Make Lin better.' She gestured.

'Maybe lose those claws.'

'They're handy with boys,' said Coe, 'like that Fergus kid.'

Silence, caution.

'Gnostic's climbing with you - for sure?'

Tyle nodded. 'What it said.'

'Those rums.' But Coe grinned. She too liked them.

She stood. 'Come on, I'll cut you hair.' She laughed.

'You really will drive me nuts, Ryko!'

Uncle Gil glared as the girls hoisted backpacks. 'Only one person climbs. That's how it's done.'

Tyle pulled a shoulder strap snug. 'Not this time.'
'And you won't make it sing,' Gil said. 'Tree's never sung, 'cause it can't have to. You won't put an end to nothing just climbing.'

'Thought you wanted me to.'

Tyle stood with a cool sparkling jug of water in both hands. Coe too stood drinking. More water lay along the way but charging their bodies from the spring made sense, the season being warm. Tyle nodded at Gnostic. 'Anyway, ask him - wasn't my idea.'

Gil glared at the little green Gnostic, squatting, knees folded to his chest. 'Blame busy-bodies. Never did trust 'em, that's the truth.'

'Uncle Gil!' Tyle laughed, tossing the bangs of her short mop. 'The tree would fall down to hear you say that.'

'Don't you tell me what the tree would do - a girl with no calling yet and near fifteen? I can't hold my head up for shame!'

Tyle had never heard her uncle like this. He had always been as set in his ways as a boulder in a field but now he stood hunched, shoulders drawn up, his cropped head angled at her. His lip curled showed a tooth and a hot point of light in one eye had a lunatic glint. He might have bitten them. A dozen people nearby quit talking. Seared.

Coe touched Tyle's elbow. 'Let's just go.'

Gnostic rose to all fours, like a dog trained to hunt.

Twenty paces into their hike, Gil screeched: 'Do it yourself, girl, damn you - do it or fall!'

Tyle's face burned. She shrugged her pack higher.

But walking worked her anger and embarrassment into the grassy ground. She and Coe hit a strong stride on the long gentle slope to the lip of the first rise, and scarcely noticed when they had topped it. An hour later, when she glanced back, she could not see the village, only blue sky and creamy clouds and a chunk of gray cliff face above the village spring. Ahead lay rolling prairie. Chiffs thrust through the grass like islands draped in sinuous vine. Between these islands of deeper green and woody browns a trail cut westward, like a lone wheel rut, along which Gnostic trotted, occasionally pausing.

They topped another long rise then halted. The land descended gently into a vast basin of dense ground cover, a succulent with deep green leaves and small violet flowers. Where the flowers grew thick you could bed down.

Coe pointed. Tyle nodded. The Call Tree stood on the far horizon, its lone vertical line stark as a principle. All day, as they walked between thicker clumps of violet flowers, the tree

seemed to grow no closer, only darkened from deepest green to stand black on a lavender sunset.

The upright line of the huge tree vanished with nightfall but, as she and Coe bedded down, Tyle glanced back and thought she saw a vertical line at the top of the rise they had spent half that day descending. Blinking, Tyle could not be sure. Just tired, she thought, the Call Tree after-image burned as if permanently onto her retina.

They slept hard. Gnostic sat facing west like a carved thing.

Morning found them brushing off the violet flowers.

So did Uncle Gil.

He stood glaring like a tarnished copper angel of wrath, leaning on a vine wood staff as if he'd spent the night so.

Tyle, furious, cried, 'I don't need help - go back to Aunt Lani'

'You certainly don't need help and you're not getting it.' Gil wagged his head. 'You're climbing that tree right and not no other way.'

Tyle knelt, stuffing her kit into her pack, wadding her bedroll. Her face was flame. 'It's none of your business what I do. You always boss people. You bossed Aunt Lani all her life and the one time she needs you, off you go to boss me!'

Stubborn as wind, Gil said, 'You're going up that tree but one way: alone.' He glared at Coe and told her, 'Get home.'

Coe idly inspected a handful of climbing claws, as if checking a manicure.

Tyle said, 'You're the one going.' She stood facing him, pack straps in one hand, thick muppy hair in her eyes. She flipped it aside with a jerk of her head. 'I haven't even done my morning business. You here to boss that?'

Gil stood like a fissure in a cliff face, muscles in his neck gone tight.

The morning soured, Tyle and Coe set off, Gnostic at heel.

Glancing back to make sure Gil hadn't followed, Tyle asked Gnostic, 'Why didn't you wake us? He was there all night, wasn't he?'

Gnostic hopped over flower clumps like a spider monkey. 'I am no sentry. Rest is pure necessity. You may wake in the night. I am dormant.'

Coe said, 'You know that Fergus kid follows me around? He says Gnostics run on sunlight. Their skin absorbs it, like slap lights.'

Tyle forgave Gnostic but seethed over Uncle Gil watching them sleep. 'All he ever does is boss. Only one who's ever right - or ever been right, ever since the Landing.'

